



# Fostering Organizational Learning Through Vertical Teacher Teams in Urban Elementary Schools

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**Fostering Organizational Learning  
Through Vertical Teacher Teams  
In Urban Elementary Schools**

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A Thesis Presented to the Faculty  
of the Graduate School of Education of Harvard University  
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## **Abstract**

In urban schools that serve high numbers of students in poverty, setting high expectations and developing a cohesive and well-sequenced course of instruction are both crucial to students' success. Increasingly, schools are turning to instructionally-focused grade-level teams of teachers to concentrate on and coordinate efforts to improve classroom curriculum and instruction. However, although such horizontal, grade-level teams are common, few schools have vertical team structures that would allow teachers to collaborate between grade levels and contribute to school-wide improvement plans. Such vertical teams regularly convene elementary school administrators and teachers from all grades to discuss students' instructional needs and to plan strategies for addressing those needs in a coherent and coordinated way. Vertical teams have the potential to increase teachers' awareness of the interdependence of their work, to leverage human capital within under-resourced schools, and to engage teachers in developing school-wide improvement strategies.

In this study of vertical teams in two sizeable elementary schools in a large urban district, I sought to learn how administrators established the purpose and membership of their vertical teams. I wanted to understand whether and how they were able to support communication and coordination of teachers towards fulfilling school improvement goals. Using observations of vertical team meetings and individual interviews with teachers and administrators, I found that even though these two teams were still early in their development, they lacked a clear and compelling purpose, a carefully selected membership, and the dedicated leadership needed to make these teams feel supportive

and worthwhile for teachers and beneficial for the whole school. Districts and schools that wish to use vertical teams for organizational improvement should strongly consider developing administrators' capacities to define and lead these teams before dedicating the time and resources that vertical teams require.

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## Introduction

In urban schools serving high numbers of children in poverty, school improvement requires ambitious teaching. However, developing the resources, knowledge, and skills among teachers to provide such teaching has proven a persistent challenge (Borman, 2009; Duncan & Murnane, 2011). Although we know that the success of students is built year by year as they progress through the grades, communication among teachers between grades is often haphazard or completely absent, and the importance of coordinating a cohesive progression of skills and concepts is often overlooked. Johnson (2009) argues that, “Improving student learning, especially in high-need, low-income schools, requires increasing the professional capacity of schools. This is an organizational challenge that calls for a well-designed organizational response” (p. 5). Ultimately, a school’s effectiveness depends upon teachers being able to work across classrooms and grade levels to address the complex demands of student learning in new and better ways.

Teams, defined as “a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they are mutually accountable” (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993, p. 112), have gained recognition recently as one of the most powerful mechanisms for developing organizational learning (Hackman, 2002; Edmondson, 2011). However, they have been difficult to implement in schools, largely because teachers spend most of their time alone in their classroom working with their assigned students and by and large have the right to make decisions about how they use their time and materials (Donaldson, Johnson, Kirkpatrick, Marinell, Steele, Szczesiul, 2008). O’Day (2002) argues, “separating teachers and students in



independent and isolated classrooms is a strategy that has worked in the past for survival, control, and sorting, but that may not work well if the measure of success changes (e.g., to high levels of student learning for all students)” (p. 301).

While recent federal and state policies have increased scrutiny of the effectiveness of individual teachers, the school remains the unit of accountability, which faces the most serious sanctions for failing to improve student outcomes (O’Day, 2002). The isolation of teachers and teachers’ reluctance to participate in teams might hamper schools’ ability to ensure that students across the school learn and perform well. The introduction of Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) ([www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)) and robust teacher evaluation systems have added to the demands placed on teachers and administrators. In some instances, the hasty rollout of these two initiatives has meant that administrators and teachers have lacked the guidance and support to implement these large-scale changes well. As a result, school districts have turned to various forms of teacher collaboration, in the hopes that these structures will support ongoing, job-embedded problem solving.

Clearly, the need for purposeful and sustained teacher collaboration has never been greater, and yet the implementation of teams has often fallen short of providing a powerful learning opportunity for teachers and for schools. Frequently, teacher teams lack a specific goal, effective leadership, and a sense of mutual accountability (Troen & Boles, 2011). Little (1990) has described teacher teams as often being more congenial than collaborative, because teachers’ desire to retain their autonomy outweighs their interest in developing work that is interdependent. The prevailing view has been that, in schools where time is limited and teacher turnover is common, teachers have prioritized

the work in their own classroom and preferred to collaborate informally, rather than formally, with a self-selected group of colleagues (Hargeaves, 2007; Huberman, 1993; Little, 1990).

However, recent studies have shown increased interest in and opportunities for teachers to work in horizontal, grade-level teams. Teachers in grade-level teams can co-plan lessons, assess student work, and adapt curriculum to meet the varied needs of their students. In a study of teachers' working conditions in six urban schools serving predominately low-income students, Charner-Laird, Ng, Johnson, Kraft, Papay, and Reinhorn (forthcoming) found that teachers valued teams when they contributed to their individual learning and also served an organizational goal that they endorsed. Also, in a subsequent study of high-performing schools serving low-income students, Johnson, Reinhorn & Simon (2015) found that the use of grade-level teacher teams was a central feature in five of six schools studied. These findings suggest that in schools where resources may be scarce and demands for outcomes are high, teams can be a source of on-the-job, ongoing professional development with the potential to foster school improvement. But, while these grade-level teams may contribute to the quality and consistency of teaching within a specific grade, it remains unclear whether those benefits extend beyond the specific grade or discipline.

Senge (1990) described organizational learning as engaging individuals in examining how the different parts and processes within their organization work and allowing them to collaborate to improve upon them. In the case of schools, organizational learning occurs when teachers and administrators work together to diagnose and address challenges related to instruction. One possible strategy for addressing the need for

organizational learning is to create vertical teams<sup>1</sup>. A school-based vertical team is composed of a selected group of teachers who represent each grade in the school. It meets on a regular basis, is guided by administrators, and focuses specifically on curriculum and instructional practices. Vertical teams differ from other organizational structures such as ad hoc committees, which convene to evaluate a new curriculum, write a school improvement plan, or implement a specific program or initiative in the school. They also are distinct from departmental teams, which have a narrow focus on a specific content area. Structurally, vertical teams have stable membership, are ongoing, and focus on increasing the consistency and coherence of students' educational experiences across classrooms. For example, vertical teams may provide a space to discuss how the school is consistently setting high expectations for students and what that looks like in each grade. They may allow teachers and administrators to consider whether and how the current curriculum meets the needs of students across grades and what supplemental supports might be required. Finally, such teams may ensure that teachers can discuss their knowledge of teaching strategies, which they believe may benefit students in other grades. Discussions of instruction in vertical teams are intended to benefit the school as a whole, not necessarily the immediate needs of the teacher and her classroom. The goal is for the school to develop an organizational approach to instructional improvement.

While participation on committees organized around specific topics, such as school discipline, or certain school needs, such as professional development, have been a

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<sup>1</sup> The term vertical team has also been used at the district level to describe teams that have representatives from central offices and schools working together (for an example see Ash & D'Auria, 2013), and the term has also been used to describe teachers from across grade levels who collaborate with a specific disciplinary focus (for an example see dbqproject.com).

part of most schools, vertical teams that are dedicated to increasing instructional coherence appear to be a more recent development and unique in their representative membership and their more ongoing, global aims. While there is a growing literature on grade-level teams and departmental teams within a discipline, vertical teams within elementary schools have not yet been described or analyzed in the research literature. Although vertical teams have the potential to capitalize on teachers' desire to solve problems with colleagues and guide the direction of whole-school improvement, we know very little about what the explicit purposes of these teams are, how they are organized, how teachers and principals participate on and experience them, and most crucially, whether and how vertical teams have a positive impact across the organization, by increasing the cohesiveness of instruction, and developing a strong professional culture.

In this exploratory study, I examine the work of vertical teams in two large urban elementary schools. Each of these schools established a vertical team including representatives from each grade level who met regularly to discuss issues of school-wide significance. In this study, I explore the organizational challenges that these schools experienced as well as the administrators' priorities, actions, and responses. Based on prior research on effective teams in schools and other sectors, I knew that establishing vertical teams would place unusual demands on the school's administrators and teachers, and that those demands would have to be met if the vertical teams were to succeed. I investigate whether and how administrators framed a clear purpose and structure for the vertical teams in their schools (Hackman, 2002; Edmondson, 2011). I examine how administrators and teachers participated in selecting the membership of the vertical team

at each school (Weiner, 2014). I observe and analyze what occurred during team meetings and whether the teams' structures supported the teachers and administrators in working together effectively (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). Finally, I seek to understand if and how the work of the vertical teams influenced the school as an organization; that is, did vertical teams influence the viewpoints or practices of teachers throughout the school and did teachers perceive them to be an effective mechanism for individual and organizational learning about instructional improvement?

In examining the formative development of these two vertical teams, I found that administrators had not adequately framed the work of vertical teams with a "clear and compelling purpose" (Hackman, 2002). Instead, teachers perceived the purpose of the team primarily to be fulfilling requirements for district reviews. Secondly, administrators could not or did not carefully select the members of the vertical team based on a consideration of teachers' specific expertise in addition to their grade level. Further, the administrators who led vertical teams did not frame the work as an opportunity to learn in a way that would motivate the teachers to persist through challenges and setbacks. Additionally, they did not establish an environment of psychological safety (Edmondson, 2011) so that teachers could speak up, disagree, or propose alternative ideas during vertical team meetings. These factors limited the possibility that these vertical teams could contribute to the organizational learning and improvement as administrators hoped they would.

In Chapter 2, I review relevant literature related to teacher collaboration, teams, and teaming for organizational learning. Prior research on teams offers insights into the demands that establishing a vertical team places on school administrators. Then I

describe my research methods in depth. In Chapter 3, I examine the accountability demands of the state and district that prompted these administrators to develop vertical teams. In Chapter 4, I introduce the two schools in my sample and describe their neighborhood and student population, their administrators and teachers. Next, in Chapter 5, I describe and analyze the organizational challenges that school leaders hoped to address through vertical teams. In Chapter 6, I investigate how administrators established the criteria for membership on the vertical team, particularly whether they considered characteristics such as expertise, years of experience, or different role responsibilities as meaningful attributes for vertical team members. In Chapter 7, I analyze the administrators' leadership of the vertical teams' efforts, specifically whether they developed an aspirational purpose and psychological safety for teachers working on the teams. In Chapter 8, I report on my analysis of team practices during meetings, including agendas and how they were developed, rules for discussions, and expectations for participation during meetings. Finally, in Chapter 9, I discuss the implications of this study for future research, policy, and practices around the implementation of vertical teams.

This study contributes to the literature on teacher teams, organizational learning, and teacher leadership. Examining vertical teams in their earliest stages of implementation offers insight into the introduction of a new structure in schools. Vertical teams seem to be of growing interest among administrators who are seeking ways to connect the work of grade level teams and boost the benefits of collaboration across their schools.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review and Background**

The vertical team is a recent and largely unstudied phenomenon in schools. Prior research on what has supported or constrained other forms of teacher collaboration informed my approach to this study. In this literature review, I consider how expectations for classroom teachers have shifted from working in isolation with near complete autonomy to the expectation that they participate in assorted forms of collaboration, including grade-level teams.

### **Norms of isolation versus collaborative cultures**

The image of a teacher, standing in the front of the room and addressing her pupils in rows of desks persists as the common conception of the role of teacher. Lortie's (1974) description of teachers isolated within an "egg-crate" school structure remains relevant in many schools today. Johnson (2015) explains that, "The egg crate symbolizes both a physical structure and an organizational one—teachers work in isolation, concentrating on their own students largely to the exclusion of others, interacting only intermittently with their colleagues" (p. 119).

Little (1990) describes the persistence of isolation, explaining that teachers' "autonomy is grounded in norms of privacy and noninterference" (p. 550). Schools are organized so that a teacher's work with her individual students can continue largely uninterrupted by staff turnover, changes in leadership, or new district level initiatives. O'Day (2002) points out that an inherent challenge of No Child Left Behind has been that, "The school is the unit of intervention, yet the individual is the unit of action" (p. 295). Coupled with the oft-touted finding that the quality of the teacher is the most important school-level factor in students' learning (McCaffrey, Koretz, Lockwood, &

Hamilton, 2004; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Rockoff, 2004), this leads us to believe that school improvement efforts should focus on the individual teacher. Recent efforts to assess teachers' "value added" contribution at the individual level advance this view. However, Johnson (2009) argues against this narrow conceptualization of school improvement, noting that, "schools do not become more effective unless teachers coordinate their work and contribute to school-wide improvement" (p. 3). Other researchers have come to similar conclusions. Rosenholtz (1989) found that schools with collaborative cultures were "learning enriched" (p. 206), while schools with a weak sense of common purpose and "low consensus" were "learning impoverished" for teachers and their students (p. 207).

The benefits of schools' creating and sustaining collaborative cultures between teachers and administrators are well documented. Hehir (2012) found that schools that were effective in meeting the diverse needs of students, teachers, and administrators developed collaborative problem solving cultures where they worked together to innovate and improve their practices on behalf of individual students and the school as an organization. Abelman and Elmore (1999) theorize that "internal accountability" derives from a variety of sources, but that in schools where it is present, teachers' expectations are "collective in nature. They characterize the shared norms and values of school participants developed to get the work of the school done" (p. 4). Bryk and Schneider (2002) found "organizational trust" to be the key component of schools that improved student learning. While the schools in their study did not have formal teams, they noted that regular access to colleagues allowed teachers, "to reaffirm together their shared concerns about the education and welfare of the children" (p. 68). Teams may be



employed as a strategy for increasing mutual accountability, making classroom practices public, and building a more collaborative culture.

### **The micro politics of teacher collaboration**

Hargreaves' (1994) work on the use of collaboration and collegiality as a lever for school improvement examines the micro-politics that guide most collaborative efforts in schools. From teachers' perspectives, he asserts, collegiality as it occurs in most schools is more focused on "fulfilling administrative purposes and the implementation of external mandates" (p. 190). His view of productive collegial efforts places a high value on teachers' "professional confidence and discretionary judgment" (p. 191) to respond to the contextual factors of their schools and classrooms. He emphatically states, "District policies and initiatives can be standardized. Classrooms and schools cannot" (p. 207). He further argues that district mandated and controlled forms of collaboration often amount to "cosmetic empowerment" (p. 209).

However, Datnow (2011) studied Data Driven Decision Making (DDDM) teams in California and Texas in which administrators provided teachers with regularly scheduled time to meet outside of the school day, with clear expectations about what they should accomplish. Teachers developed norms and rules for discussions, used protocols, and prepared for their meeting by writing data summaries and action plans. Teachers could decide how much time to spend analyzing data versus discussing instructional strategies to address identified student needs. In her study, she also found pockets of resistance to the administratively mandated meetings. She wrote, "Lack of buy-in was attributed to a large wave of reforms and programs implemented all at once" (p. 154). Datnow (2011) found that in spite of the fact that these schools' efforts had many of the

characteristics of Hargreave's (1994) "contrived collegiality," teachers engaged in complex discussions about their work. However, she notes that her sample consisted of "high capacity" schools with well-established cultures of continuous improvement, including "strong and stable leadership at all levels" (p. 156) and trusting and positive relationships among teachers and administrators. Datnow (2011) suggests that these contextual factors are prerequisites for the success of these collaborative efforts, and therefore, she does not draw conclusions about similar initiatives in schools with less capacity.

### Teams in practice

In a series of studies since 2000, Johnson and the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers have found that teachers entering the profession have a very different set of expectations than those who entered classrooms in the 1960's and 1970's. Teachers today do not necessarily expect to remain in the classroom for the duration of their careers. Many hope to advance into leadership positions, or have the opportunity for additional responsibilities outside of daily classroom instruction. Notably, many teachers are no longer interested in a solitary professional struggle; rather they want access to experienced colleagues who can support them in improving their craft.

In 2001, Kardos, Johnson, Peske, Kauffman, and Liu, found that new teachers had the most meaningful support from colleagues in schools that had organized structures and a common mission, both "deliberately built" (p. 283). Kardos & Johnson (2007) found that new teachers disliked the idea of being isolated in their classrooms. Additional research by Coburn, Mata, and Choi (2013) found that, by and large, teachers were amenable to collaboration and sought opportunities to learn from their colleagues. In a

study examining working conditions through a statewide teacher survey, Johnson, Kraft, and Papay (2013) found that having access to supportive colleagues was one of the three most important factors for teachers' job satisfaction, along with having strong leadership by the principal and a positive school culture.

Despite a strong body of literature indicating its importance, collegial interaction among teachers has remained a small part of teachers' work. Nationally, the 2009 MetLife Survey showed that on average teachers spent only 2.7 hours per week collaborating with their peers, despite the fact that two-thirds of them believed that "greater collaboration among teachers and school leaders would have a major impact on improving school achievement" (Markow & Pieters, 2010, p. 9). Researchers point out that US teachers have significantly fewer hours to plan and work with colleagues than their counterparts in countries with high-performing systems (Hulce, Hoehn, O'Day, and Walcott, 2013).

As these studies about teacher collaboration have emerged, researchers are still trying to learn why some teams are more effective than others. Troen and Boles (2011) find that most teacher teams lack clear purposes, structures, and leadership, limiting their impact on instructional improvement. Little (in Crow, 2008) observes that, in many grade-level teams, the urgency of tomorrow's lesson leads to discussions that mostly offer peers reassurance, advice, or quick fixes, rather than deeper explorations of assumptions and the nature of instructional and learning problems. Even in teams committed to improving practices through collaboration, teachers lack the shared knowledge base to support each other as learners. Little argues, "The ability of a group

both to influence individual practice and influence collective practice is contingent on aims held in common” (as cited by Crow, 2008, p. 54).

Charner-Laird et al. (forthcoming) found in a study of six urban schools serving high-poverty students of color, that across all schools in their sample, teachers met weekly with their grade or departmental peers to discuss curriculum and instruction. For these schools, the possibility of experiencing sanctions due to low performance on state assessments was a real concern, and teams provided teachers the opportunity to look at data, differentiate lessons to address variance in skills, and problem solve about individual students. The authors found that teachers appreciated the team experiences that were conducive both to their learning as individuals and the school’s overall approach to instructional improvement. Teachers were dissatisfied with teams that were dedicated solely to organizational goals. This was especially true when teachers did not endorse the organizational goals selected by administrators or outside consultants. Overall, Charner-Laird et al. (forthcoming) find that administrators who promote teacher teams need to consider their “goodness of fit” with the needs of both the individual and the organization, and guide them accordingly.

### **Teacher collaboration and student outcomes**

Additional research has focused on positive relationships between teacher collaboration and student outcomes (Gallimore, Ermeling, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2009; Goddard, Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, 2007; Parise & Spillane, 2010). A large-scale study in North Carolina by Jackson and Bruegmann (2009) finds that “peer induced learning” due to the assignment of a more effective teacher to a grade level, resulted in gains in standardized test scores for both English Language Arts and Math. Their study

finds that, “teachers perform better when the quality of their peers improves within the same school over time,” (p. 105) and that this difference in performance continues even two years later in measures of teacher effectiveness.

When in 2015, Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen & Grissom studied 9,000 teachers in 336 Florida public schools over 2 years, they discovered that students showed greater achievement gains when their teachers had access to “helpful and extensive” (p. 488) collaboration. Their study finds that, even when teachers rated their collaborative efforts as average, students still experienced achievement gains. Based on their research findings, they theorize that collaboration among teachers improves outcomes through both “individualistic” and “collectivist” mechanisms. The “collectivist” theory suggests that, even when a teacher participates in collaborative opportunities minimally, the benefits of the collective engagement of the rest of the faculty will “spill over to the classroom of the non-participating teacher” (p. 510). This theory contributes to the idea that, “the achievement gains of a given teacher are, at least in part, a product of the collaborative environment that surrounds her” (p. 510). One implication of this work is that, even if some teachers contribute very little, collaboration conveys an individual benefit to those who do participate and may offer some residual benefits to students throughout the school. Finally, Ronfeldt et al. (2015) find that, “promoting high-quality collaboration across a range of instructional domains is a better way to improve student achievement than promoting collaboration in any single domain” (p. 508). This means that collaboration was most successful when teachers were able to discuss instructional strategies and curriculum, the needs and specific work of individual students, and assessments and outcome data rather than focusing narrowly on any one of those

domains. The findings from this study suggest that vertical teams, with their focus on instructional improvement across the grade levels, and their intentional inclusion of teachers from each grade, might contribute to improved student outcomes.

### **Teacher collaboration and system-wide improvement**

In a recent study that examined professional learning in countries with high-performing education systems, Jensen, Sonneman, Roberts-Hull & Hunter (2016) found that in countries that consistently outperformed the US on international tests such as the PISA, school improvement strategies were “explicitly anchored in teacher professional learning” (p. 3). They also highlight the importance of “professional learning leaders at the school” (p. 13) They argue,

Teachers are more likely to change their practices when they see colleagues they admire—not just official leaders—championing desired improvements.

Professional learning leaders help create the broader school climate for learning that can rarely be driven by a single leader. (Jensen et al., 2016, p. 13-14).

If this is the case, then the vertical team model, which emphasizes representatives from each grade, allows teacher to serve as advocates and models for the desired changes to pedagogy, school culture, and student achievement.

In Jensen et al.’s (2016) example of this model of teacher leadership, teachers selected as “school staff developers” in Singapore are responsible for designing and delivering professional development, as well as providing ongoing mentoring for both novice and veteran teachers. To prepare for this role, these teachers receive training over a 5-month period in setting goals, evaluating professional learning, and developing mentoring and coaching skills. Moreover, the development of individual teachers is

aligned with the focus on departmental and school level improvement. These findings show that building a well-designed and aligned system of professional learning resides in more than mere structures or individuals, but in the interplay between them and the culture of their school.

In the US, David and Talbot (2013) spent five years studying the transformation of a high-poverty, primarily Latino, rural district in Sanger, California, which used a form of teams known as professional learning communities (PLCs) as a primary lever for their instructional improvement. Sanger succeeded by investing heavily in formal training in the effective use of PLCs, use of data, and a specific research instructional approach known to benefit ELL students. The district mandated PLC structures and routines, but also provided specific and ongoing support for, “developing trusting relationships, skills in using common formative assessments, transparency in sharing results and information about their teaching, and mutual accountability for the success of all students” (David & Talbert, 2013, p. 14). As a result of their concerted effort, the school district went from being one of the lowest performing in the state in 2004, to exceeding the state’s average Academic Performance Index (API) score in 2012. Of particular note, their ELL students as a subgroup boasted an API of 773, far surpassing the state’s average API of 716 for all students. David and Talbert (2013) attribute much of the success of PLCs in Sanger to be rooted in deep respect for teachers conveyed by administrators throughout the district, not only as professionals but also as learners.

### **Teams and teacher leadership**

Teams offer a way for the school to engage teacher leaders in diagnosing and addressing their organizational problems. Spillane (2006) defines leadership as activities

exercised by organizational members that “influence the motivation, knowledge, affect, or practices of other organizational members” (p. 11-12). If teams allow for more interaction between teachers and administrators and they are focused on improving the school as a whole, then teacher expertise can expand beyond the walls of individual classrooms. For example, Johnson et al. (2014) found that in a school where the principal practiced “inclusive leadership,” teachers were able to express their views and concerns; school improvement efforts “grew out of professional knowledge and experience and depended on teachers’ readiness to commit time and effort to school-wide improvement” (p. 18). If teams were to offer a venue where teachers could “play a meaningful role in defining and solving the problems they faced” (Johnson et al., 2014, p. 18) these teams might be endorsed by teachers and have a widespread effect.

Donaldson, Johnson, Kirkpatrick, Marinell, Steele, and Szczesiul (2008) point out that widespread calls for greater opportunities for teacher leadership are not new. In the 1980s leaders in education prioritized career ladders and began calling for differentiated roles for teachers. The evolution of teacher leadership through the 2000s included expectations for teachers to participate in professional communities, and then to serve as instructional coaches and data experts in response to high stakes accountability. As in the past, the norms of egalitarianism, seniority, and autonomy are still in play in schools today, where teachers may perceive the current reforms as an intrusion into their instructional space. In this case, the vertical team member may serve the role of moderating that intrusion by providing feedback to administrators about the challenges that teachers encounter in implementing reforms. The new demands of CCLS may also diminish the importance of seniority, as many of the experienced teachers discovered that



instructional strategies preferred under current reforms differed substantially from their current practices.

### **Leadership teams in schools**

There is a paucity of literature on school-based leadership teams, which involve teachers and administrators working together to resolve schoolwide issues. School-based leadership teams may be ongoing, such as instructional leadership teams (ILTs) that focus on schoolwide professional learning about teaching, or ad hoc, such as teams convened to write a school improvement plan. Two recent studies offer some insight into the different functions that these leadership teams might serve. Higgins, Weiner & Young (2011) studied district level “implementation teams” composed of members from district offices and school principals. These teams were “responsible to ensure that individuals across and down the organization with competing interests implement a team’s strategic plan” (p. 366). They write that in order to support district-wide implementation, being composed of individuals holding different positions within the organization was important; however, that also meant that team members were stakeholders protecting their own interests. Higgins et al. (2011) argue that the “positional diversity” (p. 372) of implementation teams meant that members were more apt to consider the ways in which the team’s work might impact and be impacted by key stakeholders in the organization. Their study concludes that implementation teams serve a distinct function from other types of leadership teams and require a separate analysis to determine what would make them effective or ineffective.

Weiner (2014) notes that Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs) are new, prolific, and understudied structures intended to “create and implement a school’s reform plan

through an explicit focus on instruction” (p. 254). She studied ILTs in four, high performing, in-district charter schools in Connecticut. The size of the teams varied from six to eighteen members, and teachers from various grade levels were represented. However, these teams were not explicitly vertical teams in that there was not a representative from each grade; nor did the members have the explicit obligation to share information with their grade-level colleagues. Weiner (2014) found that these ILTs had the general purpose of “improving instruction,” but little understanding of how to effectively collaborate to promote change. As a result, issues discussed were often “unrelated or peripheral to instruction” (p. 264). Like the Higgins et al. (2011) study, Weiner (2014) notes that these teachers were responsible for leading the reforms and implementing them in their own classrooms. She observes that when principals selected members for the team they appeared to prioritize departmental representation over instructional expertise, seniority, or status. One effect of this focus on representation over experience was that members tended to advocate for their individual constituencies and “fight over resources” (p. 268) rather than considering what would benefit the school as a whole. She notes that these teams served largely informational and consultative functions to support the principal’s decision making, but that the teams, themselves, lacked decision-making authority (Wageman, Nunes, Burruss & Hackman, 2008). Overall, Weiner (2014) finds that, in order for the ILTs to succeed, principals need support and training related to managing the change process and creating a “meaningful team purpose” (p. 271).

The limited research on vertical team structures in schools (Weiner, 2014) emphasizes the importance both of having a clear and compelling team purpose for the

team's work and membership selection based on individuals' skills and capacity to work towards that purpose. The creation of a vertical team that focuses on organizational learning is a novel and potentially valuable structure for developing greater instructional capacity and coherence within schools. Vertical teams are a slight variation on the ILT structure in that they are focused on schoolwide instructional improvement, but have an additional goal of supporting the work of grade-level teams. Although horizontal teams achieve mixed results in schools, growing evidence shows the importance of effective collaboration for improving both working conditions for teachers and outcomes for students (Johnson, Papay & Kraft, 2012; Rondfeldt et al., 2015). Both prior and current research point out the many possibilities and pitfalls of using team structures for instructional improvement.

Research on teams, both inside and outside of education, demonstrates the attention and resources required to develop and sustain successful teams. Among the most critical factors are active, engaged, and authoritative leaders who establish a clear and compelling purpose for the work of teams (Wageman, Nunes, Burruss & Hackman, 2008). Second, if vertical teams are going to support two-way communication between teachers and administrators and foster teacher leadership at individual grade levels, it is essential to carefully select members who can both represent the experiences and opinions of teachers in their grade and maintain a commitment to having the school work more cohesively.

Finally, schools are contexts that present distinct barriers to collaboration. It is essential that administrators manage expectations that come from the district and state, including the various accountability measures that apply to teachers and schools.

Additionally, learning how administrators allot resources, including time, is critical to understanding the development and impact of teams. Using what we have learned about the challenges of implementing horizontal teams in schools, researchers can begin to examine what the introduction of vertical teams might contribute to school improvement

### **Theoretical and empirical frameworks**

Edmondson (2011) proposes a model for organizational learning that has teaming as its foundation. She argues that both teaming and “organizing to learn” (p. 26) are essential in work environments where uncertainty is high and the shared work is complex. She notes that organizing to learn is valuable where “coordinated action among multiple individuals” (p. 26-27) is required and “the knowledge required to conduct work successfully takes many forms and resides in many locations” (p. 27). The “organizing to learn” concept focuses on continuous learning in a collaborative and experimental environment. This mindset is prerequisite to the type of reflection-in-action that Edmondson (2011) calls “execution-as-learning.” During this process, teams focus on “getting the work done while simultaneously working on how to do it better” (p. 30). Edmondson’s (2011) learning model provides a framework that I will use to analyze both how school administrators defined and articulated the purposes of vertical teams and how those intentions were interpreted by teachers, including both members of the vertical team and others throughout the school. Based on her research, Edmondson (2011) concludes that individual learning behaviors are critical components of collective learning organizations and that effective teams, “create environments that support and encourage sharing, experimenting, and learning” (p. 31).

Building a learning frame involves a four-step process of enrollment, preparation, trial, and reflection, which occur in an iterative process. Edmondson (2011) argues that framing the work of a team as a learning endeavor is critical to any team's success. She writes that in conditions of uncertainty, participants in the learning frame, "are open to change, eager to find the best fit, and recognize that people may have different perspectives... [They] are more likely to be curious and engage each other in relevant discussions about what to try" (p. 104). Building a team based on skills and expertise, offering preparation for the different role demands of teamwork, and then having cycles of action and reflection, where teams can refine their processes, are all behaviors unfamiliar to those in most schools.

While the process of framing any team activity has been shown to be critical, the ongoing participation and support of teachers is also essential if vertical teams are to have any influence. Given the limited time and resources in most schools, a structure that focuses on organizational needs before individual needs may be a hard sell for teachers who must meet the daily demands of their classroom. However, the "goodness of fit" framework proposed by Charner-Laird et al. (forthcoming) suggests that teachers approved the use of teams when they provided individual learning, while also supporting larger, school-wide aims for improvement. Vertical teams appear to be structured to encourage teacher input regarding those larger aims. However, it is important to understand what motivates teachers to commit to vertical teams and contributes to their work, as well as whether teachers perceive vertical teams to provide a "good fit" for their needs. This understanding can help determine whether vertical teams are sustainable and have potential for guiding and supporting school improvement efforts.

## Research Methods

### Research Design

This study is based on interviews with twenty-six teachers and six administrators in two Title 1 urban elementary schools that implemented vertical teams. In addition to conducting thirty-two formal interviews, I also collected observational data at thirteen vertical team meetings and two administrative meetings related to vertical teams. Further, I reviewed the notes and artifacts from the vertical team meetings during the 2014-2015 school year. This work builds on earlier qualitative research conducted with the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers (Charner-Laird et al., forthcoming), which examined the use of instructionally focused grade-level teams in six urban schools serving high-poverty populations. In that research, we learned that teachers found value in the team structure when their team focused on improving teachers' work with their students in the classroom and helped to advance school-wide improvement efforts. In the current study, I examine two vertical teams created in the between 2012 and 2014 to understand whether the vertical teams met teachers' expectations and contributed to a more cohesive and coordinated instructional program across the school and also how teachers described their experiences working in them.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How do administrators and teachers define the purpose of the vertical teacher team in their school?
- 2) What factors and individuals influenced this defined purpose?

- 3) What factors influenced teachers' membership on vertical teams and motivated them to participate and invest in vertical teams? Alternatively, what discouraged or prevented them from participating?
- 4) How did teachers and administrators assess their experiences with vertical teams?

### Sample Selection

I conducted this study in a large metropolitan district in the northeastern United States that serves a large percentage of students in poverty. Student outcomes across the Monument District<sup>2</sup> vary dramatically by neighborhood, but overall the district performs slightly below the state average. According to state data, 27 percent of students in the Monument District achieve proficiency on the ELA exam for grades 3 – 8, compared to a 31 percent proficiency rate statewide. The two elementary schools in my sample, Stonebridge and Kingston, qualify for Title 1 funding and serve a large number of recent immigrants and English Language Learners (ELL). I deliberately selected (Palys, 2008) these two schools because they implemented vertical team structures. The vertical team in Stonebridge was established in the fall of 2012 and Kingston founded its vertical team in winter, 2014. I collected data in 2015 and 2016.

Both schools are traditional Prek-5 elementary schools. I present basic information about them using data from the 2014-2015 school year in Appendix C. Notably, while both schools report that the majority of their students are Asian, the Asian students at Stonebridge are Central (Uzbek and Tajik) and South (Bengali) Asian, while the Asian students at Kingston are almost all Chinese. At the time of this study, both schools had

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<sup>2</sup> All names of district, schools, and individuals used throughout this dissertation are pseudonyms.

stable leadership, low teacher turnover, and were safe and orderly places for students to learn and teachers to work.

Despite these similarities, the schools differed in student achievement. The state had assigned Stonebridge a “Focus” accountability status, meaning that the school was among the lowest performing in the state and not improving. The state allotted an additional \$25,000 in professional development funding to schools with a “Focus” designation. At Stonebridge, some of this was used to fund the vertical team. While the school was under scrutiny from both the district and state, observed improvements in scores for ELL students suggested to administrators that the school was on the right track. And, although Stonebridge needed to continue improving outcomes for students, there was not a sense among administrators and teachers that the school was under imminent threat of closure or mandated reorganization. Administrators at Stonebridge were understandably eager to be removed from the State’s list of the lowest performing schools in the district and, to that end, they were motivated to show their compliance with state and district recommendations.

Kingston achieved high scores on state tests, allowing them to avoid district scrutiny, but throughout the school, teachers and administrators took district requirements very seriously. Kingston had been recognized by the state as a “Reward” school, which meant that its English Language Arts (ELA) and math scores were in the top 20 percent of schools in the state. Principal Kuo explained that the school had not been selected for a district review for eight years, which meant school staff might have developed a sense of “complacency.” She also noted that the district’s school quality rubric had changed since the school’s last review and now included new demands for teacher collaboration.



Administrators at Kingston knew that teachers had struggled in the past to work collaboratively. Principal Kuo said she hoped that creating a vertical team would help establish “trust factors” and “transparency.”

In a recent school climate survey, only 63 percent of teachers at Kingston indicated that they trusted the principal, compared to a district-wide average of 83 percent. Furthermore, only 65 percent of Kingston’s teachers said that “the principal communicates a clear vision for this school,” while the district average was 88 percent. Additionally, only 73 percent of teachers indicated that they trusted one another, whereas the district average for that indicator was 87 percent. For all of their high performance on state tests, the responses of Kingston’s teachers and administrators about school climate suggested that they lacked the type of supportive relationships that might encourage and sustain collaborative efforts.

In comparison, Stonebridge’s measures of trust and collaboration were much closer to city averages. Eighty-two percent of teachers indicated on the survey that they believed the principal communicated a clear vision for the school (with a city average of 88 percent). A slightly higher than average percentage of teachers, 84 percent, indicated that they trusted the principal; 82 percent responded that they trusted each other; and 90 percent reported that they had opportunities to work productively with colleagues in their school. These responses suggest that Stonebridge had a stronger relational base among educators than Kingston on which to build their collaborative efforts, such as the vertical team.

I selected these schools because they both had vertical team and served low-income students. However, I did not select them as contrasting cases.

## **Data Collection**

### **Document review and meeting observations**

First, I read and analyzed documents related to the prior year's work of vertical teams, which included meeting agendas, minutes, and products created by the vertical teams that were posted and available to me via GoogleDocs. This review enabled me to understand the issues these vertical teams had explored in the past and to investigate the efficacy of previous team decisions throughout the school.

I observed vertical team meetings and conducted individual interviews over the course of three months at both schools. During my observations, I took detailed field notes using an observation protocol (See Appendix B.). These observations allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of each school's context and how the participants framed vertical issues in meetings. I also observed how teachers and administrators prioritized and addressed issues. My observations yielded data about interactions during the meeting; I noted who introduced new ideas, whether participants looked to administrators for authorization to speak, and whether and how disagreements were resolved. I observed thirteen vertical team meetings, for a total of eighteen hours.

Additionally, I drew from the observational data to ask follow up questions in individual interviews. For example, I asked administrators and teachers to describe how they planned to support and implement a specific instructional strategy proposed at a vertical team meeting. I used interviews to inquire about specific exchanges or decisions that I observed during meetings. Since I wanted to focus on teachers' perspectives and views of vertical teams, interviews provided a means to capture different views and priorities that might have been omitted during the meetings. The multiple sources of data

complemented each other and supported the triangulation of my findings (Maxwell, 2005).

### **Teacher and Administrator Interviews**

In both schools I conducted hour-long, semi-structured separate interviews with the principal and two assistant principals. I interviewed all members of the vertical team at each school—nine at Stonebridge and eight at Kingston. In addition, I interviewed additional teachers from various grade levels at each school (# at Kingston and # at Stonebridge). In total, I interviewed 26 teachers and 6 administrators. Interviews with teachers lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. During interviews, I explored both the “lived experiences” and the meaning that administrators and teachers made within the specific context of their school (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014, p. 11). Interviews allowed me to develop rapport and trust with participants, thus encouraging their candor and reflection on current practices within the school. I used semi-structured interview protocols (Appendix B) to ensure that I addressed a standard set of topics with all of my participants, but also drew upon observations from particular meetings and issues related to specific school contexts. Individual interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed for analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

My analysis occurred concurrently with data collection. Following each interview, I wrote a structured, thematic summary (Maxwell, 2005) to examine individuals’ perspectives and experiences on a standard set of topics. This allowed me to apply a hybrid approach to code development, identifying *emic* codes from the

interviews, which I used in addition to *etic* codes derived from the literature (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

I engaged in an iterative process of coding and writing memos in order to explore variations, test rival explanations, and search for disconfirming data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Because I collected and analyzed data in an iterative process I found that my codes “change[d] and develop[ed] as field experience continue[d]” (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014, p. 82).

I used a two-cycle approach to coding (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). In the first cycle, I initially summarized my data, using a hybrid of process, values, and evaluation coding. Process codes allowed me to, “connote observable and conceptual action in the data” in order to examine “participant action/interaction and consequences” (p. 75). Using values coding allowed me to, “reflect a participant’s values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives of worldview” (p. 75). Finally, I used evaluation coding to indicate the “judgments about the merit, worth, or significance of programs or policy” (p. 76).

In the second cycle, I employed pattern coding to identify emergent themes and explanations, develop a cognitive map, and conduct cross-case analysis. My secondary codes focused on emergent “themes” and “relationships among people” (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014, p. 87-88). (See Appendix C for a list of codes used in each cycle.) These codes supported my analysis of how teachers described and assessed vertical teams as a means of organizational learning.

Finally, I used memos to further analyze data during and after coding. These memos allowed me to “tie together different pieces of data into a recognizable cluster,

often to show that those data are instances of a general concept” (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014, p. 96). My memos and codes allowed me to systematically look at the relationships in data across the two schools for patterns and themes.

### **Validity, Reliability, and Reflexivity**

I established construct validity in this study by drawing from multiple sources to triangulate data, including document review, observation field notes and individual interviews, (Maxwell, 2005). My coding structure and analytic memos allowed me to cluster themes and patterns that emerged across the data and identify discrepant evidence to establish internal validity (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

I became acquainted with these two schools in my role as a professional development provider for a district-sponsored literacy project, which gave me the opportunity to visit the schools several times, meet with administrators and teachers, and learn about their current goals and priorities related to instruction beginning in October, 2014. My previous experience with these schools helped me gain entrée and support from their administrators. I had not worked previously with any of the vertical team members, but they may have seen me in the school for meetings. Throughout the data collection process, I used memos to surface my prior assumptions about how the school functioned, especially in regards to the school administrators. I discussed thematic summaries and my coding schema with members of my writing group and committee to discuss the validity of my preliminary findings.

The reliability of my data was enhanced by using protocols, which ensured that I collected comparable data across respondents. I asked respondents to think of specific incidents, rather than soliciting “general states or opinions,” because those accounts can

be pursued in detail and, thus, are more reliable (Weiss, 1994, p. 150). Because I had multiple interviews and observations at each school, I could place teachers' and administrators' comments in context (Seidman, 2006). Furthermore, I read transcripts to confirm that the respondent had not been directed or influenced by me as an interviewer. Thus, I could be assured of the comment's authenticity and validity as the respondents made sense of their own experiences (Seidman, 2006). My coding and analysis allowed me to look for discrepant data within and across interviews and observations (Maxwell, 2005). By collecting observations and interviews concurrently, I triangulated accounts of processes and structures with the content of the meetings themselves, and developed probes to explore areas where there were inconsistencies or discrepancies (Maxwell, 2005).

Because my data was drawn from a purposive sample, the findings from this study are not generalizable to other schools or districts. However, this study can suggest lines of inquiry for future studies of vertical teams using larger samples and different data, including school performance data, individual student outcome data, and data related to teacher hiring and retention.

### **Reflexivity**

Emerson (1995) cautions that ethnographers need to "recognize and limit reliance upon preconceptions about members' lives and activities" (p. 14), and reminds us that, "field notes provide the ethnographer's, not the members', account of the experiences, meanings, and concerns" (p. 16). As someone who was connected to these schools as a professional development provider and remains committed to their improvement, I was predisposed to make connections or draw conclusions that others less familiar with the

school might not have. In order to moderate these effects, I reviewed my thematic summaries, memos and drafts with my writing group, specifically seeking feedback on when my interpretations exceeded the limits of my data. I agreed to give feedback to teams as an act of reciprocity. Some of this feedback process also serves as member check (Maxwell, 2005), and allows for vertical team members to ask additional questions or make clarifications.

### **Chapter 3: State and District Accountability Policy Context**

The administrators at Kingston and Stonebridge were accountable to a set of state and district policies that were a major source of their motivation to develop vertical teams. That policy context influenced the way that administrators formed and led their vertical teams. In the Monument District, where both Kingston and Stonebridge are located, many new initiatives were introduced between 2009 and 2016, including CCLS, a new teacher evaluation system, new district quality guidelines, and new curricular adoptions. In addition to the annual results from state tests, each year the district administered teacher, parent, and student surveys to measure and rate school climate; the district published all of these results online. These accountability measures were prominent in the minds of administrators as they developed vertical teams.

#### **Monument School District Overview**

In 2016, Monument District was among the largest school systems in the country with over 1 million students in more than 1,500 schools, being served by more than 90,000 teachers. The system was sub-divided into regions and districts within those regions. Demographically Monument District was very diverse racially and

approximately 78 percent of their students qualified for free and reduced price lunch or municipal public benefits (See Table 1).

Table 1. *Selected demographics of Monument District, 2014-2015*

Category	Percentage
Asian	15 percent
Black	28 percent
Hispanic	40 percent
White	15 percent
Other	2 percent
Students with Disabilities	18 percent
English Language Learners	13 percent
Poverty	78 percent

### **New CCLS Standards imposed greater demand and uncertainty on schools and teachers**

The introduction of the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) in 2009 was intended to create a substantial shift in expectations for students, but that change would only be possible if teachers could understand and implement those expectations through thoughtful, well-designed units and lessons. Hulce, Hoehn, O'Day, and Walcott (2013) explain the increased demand in this way:

The CCSS are clearly more rigorous in their learning demands on students and, therefore, require teachers to deliver instruction in new ways. To make these instructional shifts, teachers need new instructional materials, greater resources for planning and reflecting on instruction, professional development in new assessment methods, and preparation for new teacher evaluation processes.

Researchers and policymakers emphasize the importance that collaboration among stakeholders, and especially teachers, will require in the implementation of these new



standards (Darling-Hammond & Hill, 2015; Jensen et al., 2016; Wei, Darling-Hammond, Adamson, 2010). However, there is less clarity about how schools can provide the time and resources that such collaboration demands.

Monument District was an early adopter of the CCLS and a CCLS-aligned state test. The state recently convened a state-level panel that recognized that CCLS implementation had been “flawed” and had created “confusion and anxiety” for teachers in classrooms and families at home. Among their recommendations for improving the implementation was to provide “high-quality local professional development opportunities for teachers.” However, these recommendations did not stem the organized effort to refuse to take the CCLS-aligned state test. In the Monument District, approximately 20,000 students (2 percent of the district) had “opted out.” There were rumors among teachers that, following the lead of a handful of other states, their state might abandon CCLS and one teacher interviewed from Kingston believed that, “next year we’ll have a different test.”

As part of the adoption of CCLS, the district offered a subsidy for schools to purchase newly developed CCLS-aligned math and language arts curriculum. Therefore, many schools in the district were simultaneously implementing two new programs in 2013, but district-provided support for those new programs was in short supply. Monument District gave principals significant autonomy to make decisions about curriculum, instruction, resources, and professional development in their schools, with the understanding that principals would be accountable for their students’ achievement. Stonebridge had adopted both of the new CCLS-aligned programs, while Kingston planned to adapt their current curriculum to meet CCLS standards. Administrators at both

schools wanted vertical team meetings to allow for teachers to explore and discuss how their curriculum and instruction met the CCLS standards.

### **Changes in School-Level Quality Indicators Related to Increased Collaboration**

For the 2015-2016 school year, Monument District was implementing a revised set of quality indicators that were used to rate schools across the district. One of the five areas selected for formal evaluation the year of my study was “professional collaborations.” The principal’s guide to the district review said that the reviewer would evaluate whether teachers had the opportunity to:

Engage in structured professional collaborations on teams using an inquiry approach that promotes shared leadership and focuses on improved student learning.

Other indicators on the rubric emphasized “distributed leadership,” which the district defined as using principles outlined in Elmore & Rothman (1999). These qualities were summarized in district-published documents as:

- The purpose of leadership is to improve practice and performance.
- Improvement requires continuous learning, both by individuals and groups.
- Leaders lead by exemplifying the values and behavior they want others to adopt.
- People cooperate with one another in achieving their goals when they recognize other people’s expertise.
- Leaders are responsible for helping to make possible what they are requiring others to do (p. 5).

There were two ways that schools in this study demonstrated compliance with these indicators. Teachers engaged in structured grade-level teams that met after school once a week for ninety minutes. This time was not intended for teachers to use to plan lessons, grade papers, or prepare for class, but rather, to discuss instructional improvement using data. During these meetings, Stonebridge used the formal “inquiry process” that had been devised by the district and Kingston used formative literacy data to examine student outcomes and discuss instructional strategies.

At both Kingston and Stonebridge, feedback from their on-site reviews by district evaluators became the focus of the work of vertical teams. At both schools, district evaluators encouraged administrators to create and support a vertical team to demonstrate their teachers’ capacity to collaborate to improve instruction, so that meetings could be observed during a quality review visit.

The content of the vertical team meetings also conformed closely to items from the school quality standards developed by the district. For example, the Kingston vertical team focused on developing a rubric for information writing in response to the Quality Review Indicator that stated,

Teachers collaborate on designing and/or modifying common grade-wide, curriculum-aligned assessments, rubrics, and grading policies that are customized to address data-defined student and sub-group needs. These tools are used by teachers and administrators to track progress towards goals across grades and subject areas and make instructional decisions. (Monument District Quality Review Indicator 2.2, Appendix A)

However, at Kingston, a bigger priority was for the vertical team to show that they were working on building trust and collaboration among teachers and administrators. Feedback from the school’s reviewers suggested that the school should focus on building

“a culture of professional collaboration... in which [teachers and administrators] share insights relative to the coherency of teacher pedagogy, thus fostering improvement of outcomes for all learners” (Monument District Principal’s Guide to the Quality Review, p. 25, Appendix A).

### **New teacher evaluation tool emphasized teacher collaboration**

“Professional responsibilities” were evaluated on the fourth domain of the Monument District’s teacher evaluation rubric. Specifically, teachers were rated on how they “constantly seek ways to improve their practice and contribute to the life of the school.” The framework states that, “teachers must work with their colleagues to share strategies, plan joint efforts, and plan for the success of individual students” (for similar information see [danielsongroup.org](http://danielsongroup.org)).

The rubric described these four elements of the domain:

- Relationships with colleagues  
*Teachers maintain professional collegial relationships that encourage sharing, planning, and working together toward improved instructional skill and student success.*
- Involvement in a culture of professional inquiry  
*Teachers contribute to and participate in a learning community that supports and respects its members’ efforts to improve practice.*
- Service to the school  
*Teachers’ efforts move beyond classroom duties by contributing to school initiatives and projects.*
- Participation in school and district projects  
*Teachers contribute to and support larger school and district projects designed to improve the professional community.*

An administrator explained that some examples that could be used to rate the teacher’s contribution included: asking an administrator for more support in a particular area of teaching, supporting colleagues within their grade or across the school in looking at data,

or sharing during whole school professional development. This domain did not carry as many points in the final evaluation as the teacher's classroom observations, but could contribute or detract from a teacher's overall rating. Teachers on the vertical team could use their participation to count towards this rating.

### **New professional development mandates emphasized grade level team work**

In response to research showing that most teachers find professional development ineffective (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Adamson, 2010), Monument District published a handbook stating that professional learning should be defined as “routine work of a highly-engaged group of educators who come together to better their practice and in the process, improve outcomes for students.” District officials wanted schools to create professional learning opportunities that encouraged teachers to, “ask questions and problem-solve by interacting with real work - work that is relevant and connected to their day-to-day teaching and learning lives.”

Administrators at Stonebridge used some vertical team meetings as coaching sessions and expected vertical team members to then communicate what they had learned with their grade level teams. For example, Assistant Principal Spencer stated that State reviewers had praised the co-teaching in special education classrooms as “beautiful.” She explained that the State reviewers said, “Any time you have someone else [assisting you] in the room, you should be using co-teaching or stations.” She added, “We were considered “developing” in that area, so it’s a huge push and becoming a non-negotiable.” Vertical team members were expected to teach their grade- level teams about the co-teaching models and answer questions their colleagues might have about the strategies. In this way, the vertical team members were expected to communicate

expectations and provide the professional development to their grade levels to support the implementation of schoolwide strategies. This model of dissemination relies upon horizontal teams that meet regularly and are well organized and led. In both schools, teachers reported that their grade level meetings were not efficient or structured with clear leadership and norms to promote professional learning to occur.

My data and analysis suggest that Stonebridge administrators' decision to develop vertical teams and set team agendas was strongly influenced by accountability demands, but they also endorsed these standards as worthwhile for students and teachers. However, most teachers at both schools believed that vertical teams were created primarily to comply with district demands. Prior research suggests that if vertical teams were created solely to demonstrate compliance with mandates, and they were not a structure that teachers found meaningful, they would likely be short-lived.

Additionally, administrators hoped that the creation of vertical teams could fulfill many requirements at once. They expected that vertical teams would demonstrate their school's collaborative culture, which fostered teacher leadership and showed their commitment to instructional improvement. While these demands were not necessarily at odds, the desire for vertical teams to fulfill many purposes made the focus of work difficult for teachers to ascertain. In addition to these accountability demands, administrators were dealing with school-specific issues that they wanted vertical teams to resolve. In the next chapter, I review some of the problems that administrators hoped vertical teams would address.

## **Chapter 4. The Schools**

The history of these two schools is an illustrative story of urban immigration in the United States. In this chapter, I provide background information about both Kingston and Stonebridge Elementary schools, including about the neighborhoods where they were situated, their student population, and their administrators and teachers.

### **Kingston Elementary**

Kingston Elementary School lies in the heart of Chinatown, at the foot of a large housing project devoted to the Chinese residents of the neighborhood. Even as the neighborhood has changed and gentrified over the years, the student population at Kingston remains 92 percent Chinese. At the time of my study, 61 percent of students qualified for free or reduced price lunch, but Principal Kuo stated that the student population was becoming more middle class. Approximately a third of students received services as English Language Learners. Principal Kuo noted that many of their ELL students entered the school at the lowest levels of English proficiency. This is particularly challenging when students arrive in the third, fourth, or fifth grades and are expected to immediately deal with the challenging content. The school had translators who could support families who spoke the three major dialects of Chinese.

Kingston had a long tradition of high performance on state standardized tests and their gifted and talented section always had a waiting list. When Principal Kuo arrived at the school twelve years earlier, the school was a part of a network of schools that had gained national recognition for achieving strong academic outcomes in high poverty, urban schools. In 2013-2014, 81 percent of students at Kingston scored a three or four out of four on the state's math test making it one of the highest performing schools in the

state. Reading scores hovered around 64 percent of students scoring proficient or higher. While not as high as the math scores, these results are impressive considering the percentage of ELL students and the fact that, for many more students at the school, English was not the primary language spoken at home. The state had designated Kingston a “Reward” school, which was something of a misnomer because the distinction was not financially rewarding, although it conferred on a school a certificate and the opportunity to apply for a “Reward School grant,” which came with a commitment by the school to accept additional responsibilities and requirements.

After school, the classrooms at Kingston remained full until 6:00 pm, rented by companies who offered paid classes to prepare students for state tests. In the Monument District a high score on the state test increased a child’s chance of being admitted to a selective middle school and subsequently one of the city’s elite high schools, which motivated parents to enroll their children in afterschool programs. One teacher thought 95 percent of her fifth-grade students participated in at least one such class every evening and on Saturdays as well.

In spite of their high performance, the student population of Kingston was shrinking, from over 1,000 students five years earlier to approximately 750 students in 2015-2016. Families were moving out of Chinatown in search of more affordable rents and more space in and around the five other “Chinatowns” that had emerged outside of the city. Because the school was funded on a per pupil basis, Kingston’s dwindling enrollment had required difficult budget cuts that administrators and teachers felt keenly. In the past, Principal Kuo had provided all the students in the school with an additional enrichment period of art or music, which the school could no longer afford. Special



education teachers went from being assigned to a single teacher and class to moving among several classes. Principal Kuo was forced to consolidate a first-grade class so that each section had 32 students. Still the school faced a significant budget shortfall. At one point, the school had 4 reading specialists, but by 2015, they had none. In spite of these cutbacks, Principal Kuo still made an effort to meet her students' and teachers' needs. When a national retailer offered a deep discount on sleeping bags, she bought one for all the fifth graders who were going on their first camping trip. Her fellow administrators praised her for being "resourceful" in looking for grants and sponsors of programs.

Principal Kuo began her career as a student teacher in another nearby Chinatown school. She taught special education, became a kindergarten teacher, and then moved on to teach second- and third-grade before becoming a school math coach. She was initially wary of administration. She explained that in the past she had told herself, "I would never be a principal, because I don't want to deal with the politics and the parents." But other administrators encouraged her to take advantage of a city scholarship program that paid for administrative credentials. She served as an assistant principal for two years in another Chinatown school before taking the job as principal at Kingston in 2003. At the time she became principal, Kingston was already a high-performing school. On becoming principal, she said she thought to herself, "Oh, my God. I need to make sure that I keep up the standards." She recalled, "the quality of the teaching and instruction here was of high caliber," because the district had invested heavily in professional development and teachers were "going out and learning about the craft."

Her two assistant principals, Ms. Kennedy and Ms. Keefe, were hired on the same day in 2010. Both began as classroom teachers and then became math coaches prior to

becoming administrators. Kingston's three administrators worked closely together and seemed very unified in their perspective on what the school needed to improve. Each of the administrators had teachers whom they directly supervised, and they divided responsibilities, such as testing coordination, scheduling, and special education meetings. Throughout the school, teachers largely referred to these individuals as "administration," rather than identifying them by name.

Over the previous five years, the district had introduced the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) and teacher observations that carried high stakes. Both of these discouraged the teacher's lecturing from the front of the classroom and required increased student interaction and small group work. Similarly, the district's standards for school evaluations had also changed. In Monument District, schools that met or exceeded district averages were selected at random for reviews and Kingston had not been selected for eight consecutive years. Principal Kuo was concerned that this led to "some complacency" among teachers and administrators. She noted that, although student performance on assessments remained steady, the district now expected schools to have structures for teacher collaboration and teacher leadership, which Kingston lacked. Assistant Principal Kennedy noted that the administrative team quickly recognized that Kingston would not "fare well" if the district evaluators looked at their grade level teams. She explained,

We knew that our classes—our school didn't use common assessments across a grade. We knew that it wasn't as cohesive as it should be across grades, across the school. That's why we felt like some of our teacher teams didn't work because

they couldn't come to the table with a common something to discuss and talk about.

Assistant Principal Keefe explained that when her team of administrators first began at the school, they were told by teachers that, by contract, administrators were only permitted to attend one teacher team meeting per month. The administrators were initially taken aback by teachers' reluctance to have them attend meetings. Gradually, they convinced teachers that they were there to support them. Assistant Principal Keefe explained to teachers, "I can't come in one time a month and be kept up to speed or support you. There's just too much time in between to sustain any conversation. So, it's not helpful." Both assistant principals subsequently attended grade level meetings on a regular basis and Assistant Principal Kennedy said that she found that she was able to build trust with grade level teams over time. She said, "It doesn't have to come from us, what they should be doing or what they should be working on. And that helps some grade levels to feel like we trust them more or they have more freedom."

Mistrust of Kingston's administrators was a common theme in my interviews with teachers. Principal Kuo attributed the "us versus them" relationship to a long-time union chapter leader who was, "not willing to be collaborative" and "not willing to compromise." She maintained that this dynamic had negatively affected her relationships with many teachers throughout her tenure. However, teachers mentioned details such as, "[You] get yelled at in front of adults, in front of children;" "rolling of the eyes"; and "you hear people tell you that you were talked about behind your back." One teacher said, "everyone feels like everyone's being attacked," and another described the school as "a toxic environment." Yet another teacher explained,

I think a lot of people are afraid to speak their minds. There are a lot of teachers that feel, if you speak your mind, that they're going to come after you. You might move grades; you might do a completely different position; you might get written up for something; your observations might start going a weird way. I feel like a lot of teachers are afraid to rock the boat, because right now they're in good standing.

Other teachers in the school described Principal Kuo as extremely dedicated and hardworking.

I do believe that our school is her life. And that she's here many, many hours. And usually I'm one of the first teachers in in the morning. It's not unusual for me to be here at 6:45 with her. And she is the last one to leave.

Another teacher explained that she “micromanages a lot” and could be “very strict and technical,” but that he had found her to be fair and capable of listening if he was assertive enough. He believed that over the past few years, as she has gained confidence in her administrative team, “she’s letting go a bit.” Nevertheless, another teacher described her experience with the administrators in this way:

Teachers here feel like we're always made to feel that we're not doing enough.

That's a common feeling among the teachers is, we're never complimented or noticed for all that we are doing. It's what we're not doing. And, I think that starts to create a lot of problems as well, and the stress.

A Chinese-American teacher attributed some of the principal’s uncompromising demand to the Chinese culture in the school.

It's the Chinese mentality, too. I guess you could say that I'm one of the perfectionists. I will keep pushing my kids. I won't give them all the praise and “You did great on this,” but [rather] “let's work on this now.” I guess that is the Chinese culture. So, for me, I've always been like this.”

Both the administration and the current union chapter leader had hoped that during the current year they could, according to an administrator, “change the tone in the building.” The current chapter leader was optimistic that the “morale has been brought up” and that for the first time in years it felt like, “we’re all on the same side.” One teacher said, “I think that [the administrators] have chilled out a bit, but I think it takes the other side chilling out, too.”

Many teachers at the school suggested that they already were working at full capacity and were not sure when or how they could take on some of the ambitious improvement work that the school leadership was expecting of them. Several teachers noted that they worked long hours and through their lunch breaks. One teacher praised her colleagues as “hard working” and “smart,” saying that people took their jobs very seriously.

We work hard. I mean during lunch time, I’m here working. I don’t stop. I mean I get here at 7:30. I don’t stop at all. You don’t see teachers hanging out together and goofing around.

A veteran teacher described his day this way.

There's not a moment that I am in this school that I am not working. I can count on one hand the number of times I have gone out for lunch. I just don't. I am a workaholic, and I think that many people are. To me, I don't even understand how

people can sit and have a lunch. I was like, “How do you get ready for the next period?”

Another teacher experienced the pace and demands of the school as overwhelming and disheartening:

What they want us to do is impossible. You want us to have important discussions and you want the kids to work together and do these things... But I have to teach all these things that don't fit into the minutes that we have in the day... It's just not good. I feel like we're just herding cattle.

A veteran teacher summarized the pace of the school by saying,

I do think it's fast here. It's hectic. I don't think things are always consistent, but I don't think it's necessarily anybody's fault. I think it's just education now. Public education - our classrooms are crowded; everybody has a lot of things to do.

Everybody has to hustle here. Everybody.

Teachers offered suggestions for what administrators could do to improve the culture at Kingston. One teacher suggested it would start with “open communication.” Another teacher added that “teachers [want] to be listened to and taken seriously. That would make a huge difference.”

Kingston, even with all of its achievement, was a school where many teachers were reluctant to speak up and felt anxious and under-appreciated. Administrators claimed that they wanted to see more leadership and participation from teachers, but occasionally undermined their own efforts by responding to teachers in ways that were perceived as retribution. This lack of trust presented a challenge for the teachers and

administrators as they attempted to build a vertical team to support collaborative problem solving.

### Stonebridge Elementary

Stonebridge Elementary School celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2015. The school was built to ease overcrowding during a time when the neighborhood's immigrant population was filling schools to capacity. In the subsequent century, Stonebridge and its neighborhood continued to be an initial haven for immigrants from all over Europe, Eurasia, Asia, and Central and South America. But the demographics of the neighborhood seemed to shift every five years, with one immigrant group leaving and another taking its place. An administrator described the school's location as a "a starter neighborhood," where families lived while they were "building up whatever money they need and then moving on." One teacher recalled that ten years earlier there had been many Russian-speaking students in the school, but they seemed to have been replaced by students from the predominately Muslim, former Soviet Republics of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as well as Bangladesh. One teacher counted twelve languages spoken by students in the school and signs all around the school were routinely posted in at least eight languages. After classes, the front of the school was crowded with mothers in colorful headscarves picking up their daughters, who were wearing Disney backpacks.

Teachers and administrators noted that in their extremely diverse population, they had very few behavior problems. Assistant Principal Spencer recalled an incident when she was supervising recess after she first arrived at the school:

A group of boys got together in a huddle. And I'm looking around, saying, "Oh, no - what's going on?" And I ran over there, and these fourth graders literally each

had a foot in, going "Eeeny, meeny, miney, mo..." and then they sat down and played Duck, Duck, Goose - because they had nothing else to do. Ha. And I'm saying, "Where am I?" - ha, ha. Where is this school? They have an innocence, these kids. These kids are still kids.

Students volunteered during their lunch and recess to help teachers clean up their libraries and collate papers. An administrator also praised the school's parent population saying, "The parents are amazing. They want nothing but the best for their kids. Whether there are language barriers or not is irrelevant - they just want what's best for their kids."

Many of the 1,000 students at Stonebridge were new arrivals with very limited exposure to English. Almost half (49 percent) were classified as ELL and of those, approximately 80 percent had arrived in the country within the past 3 years. One administrator noted that the students had a high rate of transience, leaving and then returning "the day of the test." 84 percent of students qualified for free or reduced price lunch.

Stonebridge was considered a "focus" school under the Monument District Accountability system because of its very low student scores on state tests in both English and math. At the time of the study, Stonebridge's students' scores on state tests were very low, even compared to peer schools with similar student populations. Because of those scores, state and district reviewers had visited Stonebridge over the prior two years to evaluate the school's progress. The results of those reviews had been largely encouraging, but each had generated a series of recommendations that the school was then obliged to implement. One of the biggest challenges was that the state and the district wanted the school to eliminate separate classrooms for ELL students and



incorporate them into general education classes, where they would be exposed to the full curriculum.

Principal Sylvester had spent her entire career in schools located in and around the neighborhood. After 16 years of experience as a middle school language arts teacher, she became a regional staff developer and then spent eight years as a middle school assistant principal. She took over the principal's position at Kingston in 2013. Assistant Principals Spencer and Silver were hired the year before Principal Sylvester arrived. Leadership responsibilities at the school were divided by both grade level and subject. Assistant Principal Spencer was responsible for leading math professional development and directly supervising teachers in pre-K through second grade. Assistant Principal Silver led English language arts (ELA) professional development and supervised teachers in grades three through five. Principal Sylvester supervised all pre-tenured teachers. Assistant Principal Silver said that when Principal Sylvester arrived there was a notable shift in priorities.

[The focus] became more about the instruction, more about what the teachers are doing. Planning with the teachers, and also supporting the teachers. Because we're expecting them to do all these things, but it's hard when they don't have the support.

Assistant Principal Silver noted that as a result of her efforts she had seen progress in instruction in the building and a difference in the "culture," with more "collaboration amongst teachers" and "getting [teachers] to share their ideas."

Because of their low test scores, Stonebridge had adopted two new CCLS curricula for ELA and math in 2013. Most teachers were extremely concerned that the

new ELA materials were too difficult for their ELL students. One teacher stated, “One thing that doesn’t work for our kids is the curriculum... the books are just too hard for them. So, I think we have the strategies, but we need a curriculum that fits our kids better.” In response, Principal Sylvester had purchased several supplemental reading resources and provided specialized training in phonics for her teachers. The school was also under pressure from the district to collect better data and show that teachers could use that data to inform instruction. Moreover, the teachers were expected to use the district’s formal inquiry protocol during their grade-level meetings.

Administrators believed, as one said, that “our senior teachers are the ones that give us the problem with change,” because the expectations of CCLS and the new curriculum were so different from their preferred teaching practices. But Assistant Principal Silver admitted that “Our biggest flaw as a school is that some things are not clear.” She noted that Principal Sylvester “knows her stuff and is supportive and is a great person to deal with as a boss and principal,” but also said that the principal sometimes explained things in “bits and pieces,” which confused teachers. One teacher acknowledged that the superintendent was demanding a lot of the school, but said that the administrators needed to “set little goals” so that the overall demand for improvement would be more manageable for teachers. Another teacher explained, “I think if we could get on the same page more so, and not resist everything, it would be helpful. But that language needs to be consistent.”

A common refrain among the teachers was that the school was disorganized. One teacher said, “They can’t balance schedules and the work and logistics of things.” Another said that she appreciated Principal Sylvester’s wanting to incorporate teacher

input, but that she could “waste a lot of time” in pulling teachers away from their duties for conversations. An administrator explained that Principal Sylvester wanted to be “liked by teachers. I think she understands that we do put a lot of demands on the teachers, and she wants to keep them happy.” As one example, the assistant principals would frequently use the term “non-negotiable” in an effort to make their expectations clear, but Principal Sylvester said that she was not comfortable with the term. For example, when an administrator reported that one teacher was not using the feedback tool her grade had agreed upon, rather than asking the teacher to use the tool, Principal Sylvester suggested that teachers, “submit what they were using” for review and discussion. The assistant principal remarked that these moments were frustrating for teachers who had worked to come to consensus on a single tool for the grade and for administrators who were trying to develop consistency within grades.

As I interviewed teachers from across the school, they struggled to answer questions about the school’s approach to instructional improvement. Teachers and administrators conveyed a wide array of responses that sounded more like a list of ideas than a cohesive approach. In reflecting on the school’s vision for instructional improvement, a teacher said, “the message is very complicated. And I think it needs to be simplified.”

Teachers understood the urgency of improving their test results, but were overwhelmed by the number of programs they were expected to implement. For example, in literacy, teachers in some grades were supposed to integrate four different reading programs. As one said, “Everyone’s just like trying to just stick all this stuff in and I don’t think it’s successful.” Another explained that bringing in so many different

programs meant that sometimes the training was insufficient: “The actual content seems really great. That if I did this, I really think I could see improvement. But we only had one training, so we don't really feel fully trained.” Administrators wanted teachers to implement all of the programs, each thirty minutes long, in addition to the core curriculum, which required ninety minutes or more. One teacher asked, “How do I fit it all into one day, without just saying, ‘I'm [only] going to do reading today?’” Another teacher explained that Principal Sylvester wanted teachers to have, “a toolbox full of things for us to use,” but she was concerned that the school was bringing in “anything and everything” and it felt like “too many layers too quick.”

### **The Vertical Teams**

At both schools, the vertical teams were led by the assistant principals, with the principal checking in on team progress during administrative meetings and occasionally observing the vertical team meetings. Administrators at Stonebridge set an agenda for each meeting, while administrators at Kingston left it up to the teachers to decide how to use their time together.

At Kingston, the vertical team had eight members: six teachers, one representative from each grade K-5, one specialty teacher, and one ESL teacher. All of the teachers on the vertical team were experienced teachers with 8 to 28 years of teaching experience, although three had been at the school fewer than 5 years. The vertical team was racially diverse with four white, one bi-racial (Asian and white), one Latino, and two Asian (Chinese) members. Kingston's vertical team met weekly, in an empty classroom, during the first period of the day. Team meetings lasted 50 minutes and generally started on time. Most members attended every meeting.

The Kingston vertical team focused on developing a K-5 rubric that clearly described grade-level expectations for the content, structure, and mechanics of informational writing. Initially, they wanted to create a single rubric that could be used by teachers, parents, and students to understand how writing expectations increased each year. However, they quickly decided to focus on a rubric for teachers to use in evaluating whether a student had met standards and to work subsequently on the parent and student versions. Much of their work focused on reviewing the expectations set forth by their curriculum, comparing that with CCLS, and then incorporating standards set by the district for student writing.

Stonebridge had ten members on its vertical team. In addition to the six grade-level representatives from K – 5, the team included a teacher who was designated a representative for special education students, two teachers who represented ELL students, and a social worker, who attended but did not participate in the conversations. The school's literacy coach was often present because the meetings took place in the space she used as an office and she occasionally participated. The range of teaching experience among members on the team varied. Three teachers had fewer than 3 years and were not yet tenured. Two teachers had been at the school for more than 15 years and one, a veteran, tenured teacher was in her first year at the school. The team was predominately white, with one African-American member, one Asian member, and one Latino member. Meetings took after school every other week in the teacher's work/lunch room. Generally, meetings started ten to fifteen minutes after the appointed start time. One or more of the vertical team members were absent from most meetings. The two assistant principals alternated facilitating the meetings.

During the period of my observation, the Stonebridge vertical team was working primarily on implementing co-teaching strategies, in which the main teacher and an assisting teacher would share instructional roles. The co-teaching models that they described were intended to ensure that adults in the classroom were actively engaging in the targeted instruction of small groups. In the past, state reviewers had seen ELL teachers, special education, and instructional aides in more passive roles while the assigned teacher taught from the front of the classroom. Administrators at Stonebridge maintained that, if all adults were more actively engaged with instruction, they could better meet the diverse needs of their students.

## **Chapter 5: Organizational Challenges**

While both schools had their own distinct strengths and weaknesses, a similar set of themes emerged when I analyzed their organizational challenges, which I describe in this chapter. These themes related to issues that would be relevant to many urban schools serving large numbers of students in poverty. Principals had many aspirations for their vertical teams to support schoolwide improvement. Here I explore schoolwide issues that were relevant to teachers and administrators at both schools and explain how they connected with the vertical teams.

### **Organizational Challenges Across the Two Schools**

In spite of their apparent differences in student population and achievement, Stonebridge and Kingston faced several organizational challenges in common, which emerged during team discussions about the school's needs. Instructionally, both schools were seeking ways to better meet the needs of their ELL students. Administrators at both

Kingston and Stonebridge also sought ways to support teachers in meeting CCLS standards and adapting their instruction to match standards included on the Danielson Framework ([danielsongroup.org](http://danielsongroup.org)), which served as the basis for teacher evaluations. Additionally, principals and administrators were seeking ways to communicate priorities and expectations clearly to the entire school and to receive feedback from teachers. Finally, at both schools, administrators embraced the notion of “empowering” teachers and encouraging them to lead their colleagues in their instructional improvement efforts. Requirements for teacher leadership had also been incorporated into both the teachers’ individual evaluations and the districts’ assessments of the schools. However, at both schools I interviewed teachers on the vertical teams who sincerely wanted to serve as teacher leaders by sharing their expertise, supporting their fellow teachers, and contributing to the school’s improvement.

At both schools, these issues were identified by teachers and administrators alike as critical to the success of their students and the school as a whole. These organizational challenges called for a cohesive and coordinated response that could be enacted throughout the school. Any of these challenges might be a worthwhile focus for a vertical team and these administrators intended for their vertical team to be instrumental in addressing them. In the section below, I highlight the ways that principals, assistant principals, and teachers described these challenges.

### **Developing a Stronger Knowledge Base to Support ELL Students**

At both schools, administrators prioritized the goal of improving the performance of English language learners on ELA state tests. District-wide, schools were moving from having separate classrooms for ELL students to having ELL specialist teachers work with

ELL students within a mainstream classroom on grade-level content. Teachers explained that they tried to support ELL students in accessing the more complex texts required by CCLS. Teachers were also learning how to engage in the types of instruction set forth in Danielson's teacher evaluation framework, such as encouraging and facilitating collaborative conversations among students. At both schools, teachers raised concerns that the new CCLS curricular standards and materials they were expected to use were not appropriate for meeting the diverse needs of their students. While both administrative teams acknowledged that meeting the needs of ELL students was a priority for instructional improvement, in neither was the purpose of the vertical team explicitly aligned with that priority.

At Stonebridge, Principal Sylvester noted that "Teachers had a concern that they didn't have strategies for teaching ELL students." Assistant Principal Spencer found that when she first arrived at the school four years earlier, "teachers didn't have a lot of strategies. They weren't really solid in their pedagogy... the kids were never being pushed, they were never being challenged... you weren't seeing that differentiation." Administrators also noted that the school enrolled many newcomers who had extremely limited exposure to English. Principal Sylvester said that the school had been working to keep track of the data for individual ELL students and supporting teachers in embedding opportunities to develop literacy skills in teaching every subject. Principal Sylvester stated that the vertical team was designed so that "teachers can see the spiraling skills that go from one grade to another, so that teachers see how the previous teacher the grade before them is teaching particular skills, [and] the level of student work." Assistant Principal Spencer said that her focus for instructional improvement was "increasing the



knowledge base of the staff” by using particular phonics study strategies, guided reading, and implementing the new CCLS-aligned curriculum that the school had adopted. When presenting the co-teaching models during the meetings, administrators emphasized that ELL teachers should be leading small groups in targeted lessons.

Similarly, at Kingston, Principal Kuo explained that the language skills of “beginners” in their ELL population were “low.” The challenge compounded when students arrived mid-year in the third, fourth or fifth grade. She noted, “their struggle is harder because the content is so much more difficult for them to keep pace with.” She also emphasized building the knowledge of teachers, and “trying to make sure that teachers have good teaching strategies. And also, rigor is always the big thing.” The school was increasing the ELL support provided during regular instruction in mainstream classes, instead of removing students from those classes to work in ability groups. Principal Kuo noted that, in order to co-teach effectively, it was important that “everyone is seeing across the grades and across different people’s roles.” She believed that increasing teacher collaboration would allow teachers to, “work together in order to create rigor within their curriculum.” Administrators hoped that the increased challenge of each grade level would be made apparent by the informational writing rubric that the vertical team created.

Notably, administrators at both schools explained that there was very limited time for classroom teachers and ELL providers to meet together to plan instruction or discuss specific students. Teachers reported that they relied upon emails, text messages, or quick exchanges in the hallways or classrooms to try to coordinate their activities.

### **Increasing Consistency and Rigor through the CCLS**

At both schools, administrators expressed concern about the lack of consistency and rigor throughout their school. Kingston's Assistant Principal Keefe said she had noted during observations that instruction, "varied so much from room to room, even though they are on the same grade, that I really had a hard time understanding what was being taught, scope and sequence, [and] how it's being taught." Without my prompting, administrators from both schools offered examples from the upper grades illustrating that they discerned no difference between the writing of students in the fourth and fifth grades.

At Stonebridge, Assistant Principal Spencer observed that in the past, "The fifth-grade writing topics didn't look any different from the lower grades." At Kingston, a teacher observed that she and her colleagues did not discuss how expectations for students were supposed to increase:

[Principal Kuo] looked at the bulletin boards in third grade and then in fourth grade, and the work was virtually identical. There didn't seem to be any growth. Well, this was when we didn't have actual writing units. You know, we were all just kind of taking these big packets and trying to discern from there what was expected. So, there was no clear expectation that fourth grade would show this kind of growth from third grade.

A veteran colleague at Kingston thought that greater consistency would help teachers and students alike:

You want to be able to see where your kids are going to, where have your kids come from, what has your [last] teacher taught up to? And if the teacher's not teaching up to that [level], why is that happening? So we're all on the same page.

At Stonebridge, Assistant Principal Silver attributed this lack of consistency and rigor to teachers' lack of time to review the CCLS and discuss strategies for achieving them. She explained that administrators' priorities for the vertical team included teachers' understanding how well they were meeting grade-level standards and "preparing [students] for the next standard." She offered a scenario in which a second-grade teacher could learn from first-grade and third-grade teachers about previous accomplishments and what gaps in skills or knowledge remained. She explained that in a vertical team meeting, teachers might have an exchange such as, "So you led me up to here. You found this difficult, okay. That's going to help me with my instruction. And they need to be up here for the third grade." During vertical team meetings, teachers were expected to discuss strategies that they had used effectively with students and then to utilize them in their own classrooms.

At both schools, administrators mentioned that having a shared instructional vocabulary among teachers would support greater consistency. Administrators wanted teachers to be able to discuss the finer points of the standards and to compare those with the content and method of their current teaching. Assistant Principal Silver explained that in the CCLS, there are "a few little words" that differentiate the standards and that she wanted teachers to understand them more clearly. For example, she said that in the standards the distinctions between, "few, to all, to many" or "explain or discuss" were important and that teachers needed to understand them. Therefore, administrators used vertical team meetings to focus on specific aspects of the CCLS standards and attempted to incorporate the language of the standards into their discussions with teachers.

At Kingston, Assistant Principal Keefe said that teachers lacked a shared vocabulary to discuss teaching because they were “naming the same thing something else.” As a result, students might be confused about what they had learned because teachers from different grades might refer to the same skills by different names. Administrators hoped that, beginning with the vertical team, teachers could delve into how their teaching and curriculum corresponded with the CCLS standards. For example, one of the earliest activities of the vertical team at Kingston was to compare how their current writing units corresponded with CCLS standards.

Therefore, teachers across both schools spent significant time and energy adapting curriculum and instruction in order to bridge the greater demands of the CCLS and the language development needs of their students. Teachers’ highest priority was to understand how to use curricular resources to meet standards and improve student outcomes.

### **Communication**

Administrators at both schools wanted the vertical team to improve communication between administrators and teachers. Given that the schools had over 900 students in dozens of classrooms, keeping teachers throughout the schools well informed about priorities was an ongoing challenge. Both schools were still adjusting to the statewide adoption of CCLS and the district’s new teacher evaluation system. District officials required that the afterschool time, which had once been used for whole-school staff meetings, should become an 80-minute period for teacher collaboration. Given that the administrators had lost that opportunity to address the entire staff in a single meeting, they relied upon newsletters, memos, and emails to communicate with teachers. Because

they believed these were insufficient, administrators hoped that vertical team meetings would become a means for conveying school-wide priorities to teachers.

However, low levels of trust at Kingston meant that teachers were cautious in what they communicated and suspicious of what was communicated to them, whatever format was used. One teacher described receiving a packet of material in her mailbox with “no directions, no labels. But then we are expected to do it.” Several teachers pointed out that, when they asked questions, they were referred to language in the teacher contract or the handbook in a way that discouraged them from asking further questions. A teacher explained, “teachers, of course are always reading between the lines and we're just afraid to take ownership of anything, because there are always these hidden expectations that they're not communicating to us, but we know are there.”

Administrators thought that supporting good communication was a high priority at Kingston. For the past five years, communication between administrators and teachers was characterized by an adversarial tone. Principal Kuo noted that she and her administrative team tried to make their expectations as clear as possible during meetings and through memos and teacher handbooks, but that communication breakdowns still frustrated her. She noted that teachers did not seem to trust her. When she had attended meetings in the past, her offers such as, “I’m here right now. You ask me the questions,” would be met with silence from the teachers. Kingston administrators did not understand the cause of the ongoing mistrust that they experienced from teachers. In previous years, teachers had told administrators that they were not welcome to attend their grade-level meetings and they invoked a clause in their contract saying that administrators could only attend one teacher meeting per month. Since this clause was non-existent, administrators

were able to dispel this erroneous belief and began attending meetings regularly, Assistant Principal Kennedy said, “It seemed very divided, us against them, administrators against teachers, to some degree... We definitely felt like we needed to work on school culture and have people feel like we’re behind them, we support them, we’re working together.” Administrators hoped that by convening the vertical team they could demonstrate to teachers their interest in hearing their ideas and convey their trust in them in a way that would have widespread effects. Principal Kuo added that teachers would know that ideas generated on the vertical team were, “not coming from administration, but these are decisions that were made by the teachers themselves, and then they would communicate and share.”

Teachers at Stonebridge, including those who were not members of the vertical team, also thought that communication should be improved. A teacher noted that staff were “busy with lots on their minds,” but she hoped that, as a member of the vertical team, she could relay information about expectations with her grade-level colleagues. A teacher explained that when she directly asked administrators how to implement all of the ELA programs that had been added, their response was essentially “OK, I’ll get back to you.” Teachers at Stonebridge believed that the administrators were knowledgeable and well-intentioned, but many felt that the rapid pace of change at the school made work feel frantic and disorganized. Teachers wanted more “follow through” on ideas. One teacher described the school’s communication as “all over the place.” She added, “I’m not sure where we want our school to go, except to get better.” One of the administration’s aspirations for the vertical team was that it could become a clearinghouse for teachers’ questions and concerns and that answers could be relayed back to grade level teams.

Principal Sylvester said that, when new initiatives were conveyed teacher to teacher, “it's a little bit more personal. It's a big message to get across to them in a small group as opposed to a big message to get to a large group.”

Time for communication was a prominent concern for all the administrators. Assistant Principal Spencer at Stonebridge noted that there were various teams and committees that all needed to provide information across the school, but that they ended up “jostling for time and space.” She explained that, although she believed that all grade-level teams were “getting their own independent work out and done,” she wanted to see “more of a meshing” among the work of teams throughout the school. Assistant Principal Silver believed that it was more efficient for vertical team members to discuss new information at their grade level meetings than to have the administrators try to visit each grade-level meeting to explain a new policy or initiative. She said, “I would want everyone to get the message at the same time.” Since administrators could attend only one grade-level meeting at a time, in the past that had resulted in “people running around the building,” which meant having insufficient time for administrators to address individual questions or concerns. The vertical team structure might provide some assurance to administrators that they were communicating the same message to the grade level representatives, who then would assume the responsibility of communicating that message to their colleagues.

### **Teacher Leadership**

Administrators mentioned the importance of such things as “giving teachers voice” and “empowering” teachers. They also wanted teachers to “take ownership” of

initiatives. Therefore, they saw the vertical team as a way to designate some teacher leaders and support their development as both teachers and leaders.

At Kingston, Principal Kuo was concerned that teachers were reluctant to speak up with their colleagues, and were thus unable to voice their support of new initiatives in the school. She noted that in the past the teachers had expressed concerns such as, “They’re my colleagues. They’re my peers. I don’t really want to say anything.” She said that participating on the vertical team might support their “leadership skills.” Principal Kuo noted that, while they could not afford to formally train all of the vertical team members in facilitation skills, she hoped that some teachers might serve as “a colleague mentor” to other teachers in the school so that they “can share some of the skills, protocols, and ideas to broaden their capacity.” Assistant Principal Kennedy hoped that the vertical team members would become a key group of teachers at the school who could feel like, “they can help their grade levels move in a direction. It doesn’t have to come from us, what they should be doing or what they should be working on. And that helps some grade levels to feel like we trust them more or they have more freedom.”

At Stonebridge, Principal Sylvester observed that their vertical team members were not trained or compensated as coaches or teacher leaders. She noted that what they asked of their vertical team members was “to be good listeners, to take notes” and make some “simple statements” about the current focus of instructional improvement that administrators could then follow up on. Assistant Principal Spencer mentioned that sometimes vertical team members might be challenged or “some people might take hold of what they said, and others would dismiss it.” For Principal Silver, it was important that teachers convey to their colleagues that the demands were coming from the



administrators and that vertical team members were simply communicating the expectations, not setting them. Administrators wanted to use the vertical team meetings to “front-load our support” and to explain to the entire school that the vertical team member’s role was to explain the administrative expectations “that we want to see implemented.” Assistant Principal Silver added that administrators still intervened with individual teachers who had problems or questions, but that teachers should be clear: “We’re not shooting the messenger.” She instructed vertical team members to, “jot down any questions that you don’t have the answer to, and we’ll take care of it.” Assistant Principal Spencer noted that, with this explicit communication, she had observed that during the 2015-2016 school year, vertical teams were experiencing much less resistance from their grade-level peers than during the year before.

However, Principal Sylvester also wanted to develop vertical team members’ instructional skills so that their classroom could serve as a “lab site” where other teachers could observe effective implementation of new strategies. Assistant Principal Silver believed that “for the most part” vertical team members were instructionally strong and she hoped that, with the explicit support offered during vertical team meetings, teachers would “understand [the strategy] the best. Even if they don’t know everything, they’ve seen it and they’ll be the most eager to try.” Assistant Principal Silver explained that vertical teams created an opportunity for “sharing and collaborating” so that team members could be “self-reflective.” She thought that the experience was helping teachers on the vertical become instructionally stronger. She had noted a shift from teachers’ having the attitude, “[Students are] not getting it. They can’t get it” to “How can I do it

another way, to make them get it?” This type of reflective discussion was something they hoped vertical team members would encourage among their grade-level colleagues.

## Conclusion

Because vertical teams were intended to support instructional improvement in schools, understanding how administrators defined their vision and priorities for instructional improvement was an important first step to understanding how they arrived at the goals they set for their vertical team. At both schools, administrators listed a variety of instructional priorities during their individual interviews and teachers echoed many of the same concerns in their interviews. Indeed, teachers and administrators at many other schools that serve large numbers of low income students might name these as critical issues to address. In both Kingston and Stonebridge, vertical teams became the main mechanism to involve teachers in addressing these school-wide concerns.

Administrators placed a high value on ensuring that the vertical teams had a representative from each grade, but confronting their school’s challenges required specific instructional expertise. Specifically, teachers need to understand instruction from a systematic perspective. In other words, rather than focus exclusively on the needs of students in their grade, teachers would want to explore the prior development of student skills and knowledge as well as what comes next. Teachers with specific expertise in working with ELL or special education students might have more to contribute to discussions about providing differentiated supports to students. Moreover, teachers needed the skills to communicate effectively with their grade level teams in engaging and persuasive ways, if they wanted to encourage their peers to make changes to their instruction. Ideally, vertical team members go beyond simply conveying a message from

administrators by supporting teachers in comprehending the challenges and benefits of proposed initiatives. Engaging in these discussions could then further inform vertical team discussions to help teachers and administrators gain perspective on the complications and opportunities in each grade.

In the next chapter, I look at the membership of the vertical teams, specifically how members were recruited and selected and how their responsibilities were defined.

## **Chapter 5. Membership**

Effective teams are composed intentionally to ensure that each member understands the purpose of the team and can contribute to its achievement (Hackman, 2002; Weiner, 2014). In educational settings, most teams are either by grade level or department and to include all teachers. Vertical teams in elementary schools are composed of a more select group of teachers who serve as grade level representatives. Ideally, members would be interested in the defined purpose of the vertical team and have skills, perspectives, and opinions to contribute to the cohesiveness of the school.

Teams were composed differently in the two schools. At Kingston, administrators approached specific individuals, asking them to participate on the vertical team. Some members there were not sure why they were approached to participate or what they were expected to contribute to the team. At Stonebridge, administrators solicited participants for the vertical team through an open-application process, which would imply that a teacher who applied would have an interest in and commitment to participating. However, because of the voluntary nature of participation, it was not clear whether the vertical team had the right mix of expertise and experience among its members (Higgins et al., 2012). While these teams were still in the early stages of development,

administrators preferred having a representative from each grade level in order to ensure positional diversity, rather than favoring those with more years of experience teaching or years at the school. In interviews, administrators listed a set of characteristics that they thought a valuable vertical team member should have, including strong instructional skills, positive relationships with colleagues, and effective communication capabilities, but they did not explain those qualities to the vertical team members. Thus, some teachers were confused about what they could contribute to the vertical team or whether their participation was valued by their teammates.

Previous research (Higgins, et al., 2012; Weiner, 2014) emphasizes the importance of the composition of membership for a team's effectiveness. Higgins et al. (2012) summarized the qualities of a "real team" (as defined by Hackman, 2002) including "clear boundaries of who is on the team" (p. 369) and "membership that is relatively stable over time" (p. 370). They theorized that "positional diversity," defined as individuals who represent different constituencies in the school, might contribute to team learning. Higgins et al. (2012) studied district level implementation teams in which positional diversity meant that there were superintendents, district staff members, principals, as well as classroom teachers and other school based staff on the team. Most of the members of the vertical teams in this study, were classroom teachers who represented grade levels, with several others who served in student support roles such as ELL or special education teachers. Principals at both schools believed that having teachers from different grade levels would provide diverse perspectives that would enhance learning and, therefore, they considered having a teacher from each grade level to be essential for the team to be complete.

Higgins et al. (2012) argue that diversity of experience is relevant to team learning and influences whether ideas that teams generate find widespread acceptance in the organization. Teams that are composed primarily of veteran teachers might appear to be too tied to the status quo, while a team of less experienced or younger teachers might be perceived to be pushing for radical changes. Higgins et al. (2012) hypothesized that diversity of years of experience on a team might contribute to balanced perspectives and a greater acceptance of initiatives from both veteran and novice teachers.

Weiner (2014) suggests that, in order to achieve the ambitious goals of most instructional leadership teams (ILTs), members should be selected for their skills and knowledge. Because administrators in her study had insufficiently defined the purpose and function of their vertical teams, knowing which teachers might be effective members was difficult to determine (Weiner, 2014). Weiner concludes that meaningful criteria for selecting members include: “whether these individuals are knowledgeable about and represent views from across the organization, have expertise explicitly aligned with the team’s goal, and can effectively work together and communicate the team’s decisions to the larger community” (p. 258, Weiner, 2014).

Ideally, the members of the team would bring skills and perspectives that would contribute to fulfilling the team’s purpose. However, teams in schools have several specific limitations. First, elementary school teachers are usually generalists. Because they are responsible for all aspects of teaching in their classroom, they are often presumed expert in all aspects of teaching. Even if teachers possess strengths in a specific subject or aspect of teaching, the egalitarian nature of schools (Donaldson et al., 2008; Wiener, 2014) means that, for example, the teacher is predominately regarded as a

“second grade teacher” rather than an expert in science teaching. Additionally, in schools, “expertise has been loosely defined or shunned in favor of the view that effective teaching is an expression of a teacher’s personality” (Wiener, 2014, p. 258-259).

At Stonebridge and Kingston, administrators’ ideas about the characteristics of a good vertical team member were subordinate to having a representative from each grade. In some cases, this meant that a grade’s vertical team member was the person willing to serve in that role. Ideally, administrators wanted teachers with strong instructional capabilities and a willingness to support colleagues. A few teachers wanted to take on this role and serve as grade-level resources, but others were unaware of these expectations and were uncertain about whether they would exercise influence over their peers. Overall, given the wide range of challenges and expectations for what the vertical team might achieve, administrators could not choose members based on relevant knowledge and skills. Instead, they had in mind a general set of characteristics, such as good listening skills and openness to new ideas, which they hoped to find among available teachers at each grade. As a result, the membership of the vertical teams at both schools reflected grade-level diversity, but not necessarily the mix of expertise, experience, or perspectives that would enable the team to progress in meeting its challenges and learn as a team in the process.

### **Team selection process**

At Stonebridge, where teachers applied to participate, the vertical team met after school twice a month. Teachers were paid a small stipend drawn from professional development funds to compensate for their time, but some who might have been interested did not apply because their childcare needs or long commutes ruled out

attending. The administrators did not have a clearly defined process for selecting applicants. During the year that I collected data, they had accepted all applicants, resulting in having multiple teachers from certain grades, some of whom considered themselves representatives of ELL or special education students rather than their grade level. Assistant Principal Silver said, “If they wanted to be part of it, we were like, okay, the more the merrier.” The vertical team that year was the largest since inception, with five new members and five returning members.

In contrast, Kingston administrators hand selected vertical team members and invited them to participate. Unlike Stonebridge, vertical team members received no additional pay, although they could choose membership on the vertical team as their required administrative duty instead of supervising the cafeteria, playground, or busses or serving on another committee. Administrators arranged schedules, according vertical team members’ availability for the weekly meeting, which occurred during the school day. Based on interviews with members and non-members of the vertical team, teachers were unaware of the criteria that administrators had used to select vertical team members.

My data did not reveal whether teaching on a different grade represented adequate “positional diversity” (Higgins et al., 2012) to enhance members’ learning or if grade-level representation was indeed a critical component for membership. As these teams mature and the ideas the vertical teams presented are implemented across the school, “the implications of their change work across the organization” (p. 372) may become more evident. Higgins et al. (2012) also argue that in schools, “the role that members hold” might be more significant to the team than the “actual individuals who hold that role.” If this were true of these vertical teams, then having a representative from each grade would

matter more than who served in the role. Again, understanding the types of positional diversity that would benefit a vertical team depends upon the team's purpose and goals. Because purposes and goals were only broadly defined in these schools, it was unclear what types of individual expertise would have benefited the team.

Teachers with different levels of experience were well represented on both teams (see Table 2). Potentially, teachers with more experience might be more respected by their peers and have more expertise to share. Teachers with fewer years of experience might be more intent on learning how to improve their instruction and open to trying new strategies. Both teams had veteran teachers with more than 15 years of experience as well as teachers with fewer than 5 years of experience. Stonebridge had three pre-tenure teachers on the team. During the meetings, veteran teachers did not lead the meetings or dominate the conversations. Because I did not observe horizontal team meetings, I cannot say whether seniority influenced how receptive grade-level colleagues were to ideas presented by less experienced vertical team members. However, in their individual interviews, teachers did not report that level of experience was a particular barrier to communicating ideas to their colleagues.

Table 2. Years of experience on the vertical teams

School	Years of Teaching Experience					Years Teaching at School				
	> 4 years	4-9 yrs	10- 14 yrs	15 +yrs	Range of yrs	> 4 years	4-9 yrs	10- 14 yrs	15 +yrs	Range of yrs
<b>Kingston</b>	0	1	4	3	8, 28	1	4	3	1	3, 25
<b>Stonebridge</b>	0	3	2	4	4, 23	2	5	0	2	1, 18

### Desired Characteristics of Vertical Team Members

Principal Sylvester at Stonebridge said that she wanted vertical team members to



be teachers who “demonstrated good instruction on their own,” were “willing to take professional research and apply it to their own practice,” and were “able to articulate in a timely fashion the information to their colleagues.” Her hope was that eventually those teachers’ classrooms could be “used as a lab site.” Assistant Principal Spencer added that she hoped that vertical team members would be the most “willing to try” new strategies. She added, “they’re also a voice back to us, to let us know what’s working and what’s not working.” Assistant Principal Silver explained that when administrators considered teachers at each grade, they selected those who would be “listen[ed] to more than they’ll listen to another.” Therefore, when they identified a specific teacher they wanted to include on the vertical team they would, “plant the seed in the teacher’s mind” and then the teacher would very likely agree to participate.

Mistrust between teachers and administrators was an issue at Kingston that administrators hoped a vertical team might ameliorate. Principal Kuo described the school’s former union representative as being unwilling to compromise and fostering an adversarial, “us vs. them” feeling among teachers. Thus, when administrators started the vertical team, they wanted to hand pick the teachers at each grade who were, as Assistant Principal Kennedy said, “people that we feel we could work with, that are - not on our side, but that look at things fairly and that are willing to really think about things and be open to things and be open to ideas.” Assistant Principal Keefe added, “we were looking for influential people in the grade... who would really think deeply about something and make sense of it.” The administration believed that it was critical that the vertical team comprise teachers with whom the administrators could “work positively” and who could, “feel like we’re behind them, we support them, we’re working together, versus us against

you.”

While the administrators at both schools had characteristics in mind for vertical team members, they did not have a process for identifying these inclinations and skills in teachers beyond their general perceptions of them. In the case of the Kingston vertical team, administrators seemed to seek individuals with a cooperative disposition more than a particular skill set. Because they had decided that the vertical team would work on informational writing rubrics, they might have selected teachers with clear interests or expertise in either informational writing or developing rubrics. They might have chosen teachers who had experience working in multiple grade levels or who had come from other schools and could draw upon a different set of experiences. Doing so might have helped teachers understand why they had been selected and sustained their interest and motivation, as well as increased the quality of the work the team produced. As it stood, teachers were confused about why they were selected and unsure about what they specifically had to contribute to the team.

At Stonebridge, vertical team members understood their primary role to be that of “messenger,” which aligned to the selection process focusing so heavily on grade-level representation. Teachers did not necessarily assume that they were expected to be an effective instructor or an individual willing to take the lead on new strategies. As we saw, Principal Sylvester said that vertical team members should, “be good listeners” and were expected to “take notes.” If administrators had communicated to vertical team members their high regard for them, then teachers might have been motivated and engaged to learn as much as possible. However, during interviews, teachers did not report that administrators chose them because they considered their instruction or communication

skills to be strong, even though administrators considered this a critical attribute of vertical team members.

Principal Sylvester at Kensington acknowledged that her vertical team members were not formally trained or compensated as teacher leaders. Teachers in the Monument District could apply to programs allowing them to serve as mentor teachers or teacher leaders and to receive an additional stipend, but members of the vertical team at Stonebridge were not included in that program. However, Assistant Principal Spencer stated that one of her goals for the vertical team was to promote such leadership: “I would like to see them have more of a decision-making voice in the school. There are a lot of instructional decisions to be made, and they have a lot of great ideas.”

### **Why did teachers participate on the vertical teams?**

At both Stonebridge and Kingston, whether teachers were asked or applied to become members of the vertical team, they ultimately had the freedom to decide whether or not to participate. Those at Stonebridge were applying for an after-school, compensated position while those at Kingston had to select the vertical team in lieu of other administrative duties. Even though teachers at Kingston may have felt pressured to participate, there was at least one teacher who reported that she declined to serve on the vertical team. Some teachers said that they felt they had to participate if an administrator asked them, for the most part members expressed an interest in learning more, supporting their colleagues, and being a leader in the school. Several teachers at Stonebridge suggested that their vertical team was a “good fit” for their needs because it contributed to their individual learning as teachers and supported worthwhile organizational goals (Charner-Laird et al., forthcoming). For others, the vertical team was a poor fit for their

needs, because they failed to understand what they were supposed to either contribute to or derive from the team and they were unconvinced that the school's improvement strategy held much promise.

At both Stonebridge and Kingston, administrators persuaded a few teachers to serve on the vertical team. One teacher at Stonebridge said that she was her grade-level representative on the vertical team because, "Nobody wants it." Another teacher at Stonebridge explained, "They were just looking for someone. They figured it would be good since I'm up for tenure and it would be good [for me] to have an extracurricular activity." At Kingston, one teacher explained that, when she was approached by the administration to join the vertical team, she refrained from asking why they had selected her because she wanted to continue to "get along" with administration. She attributed her current good standing with administration to the fact that she wasn't "a demanding or confrontational person." These teachers were open to participating on the vertical team, but none saw the work as having particular value for their own teaching or the school.

On the other hand, several teachers on the Stonebridge team appreciated the opportunity to get information first-hand from administrators. At Stonebridge, where the pressure to improve student outcomes was often accompanied by demands for adopting new programs or practices, teachers thought that being on the vertical team meant that they would learn about those changes first. As one teacher explained,

I want to be on the ball. I want to know what is going on in the school. What should I do more with my kids? I could be a person who would notify the grade what is going on. Because what I saw before, there was a lack of information.

Another teacher joined the vertical team based on her concerns that her grade level's

previous vertical team representative “wasn’t a team player.” She explained, “everything she learned at [vertical] team, she never turn-keyed back to the grade. She would only implement it in her classroom.” This participant appreciated that, because she had joined the vertical team, she could hear “what’s going on in the building.” Another teacher was motivated to join the vertical team because of her “curiosity” about knowing whether teachers were involved in making decisions about instructional changes in the school. She wondered, “Is it the teachers making this [decision]? Is it the administration coming down and saying, ‘you have to do this?’ Are they talking it out?” Being on the vertical team allowed her to see for herself what decisions were being made and by whom.

Several veteran teachers from both Kingston and Stonebridge were motivated to participate on the vertical team because they felt deeply committed to the school and believed that their experiences and perspectives could benefit others. A teacher at Stonebridge said that when she was approached to join the vertical team she quickly agreed because,

I wanted to find out what was going on within the school. I felt that that was the venue to hear what kind of choices were being made on instruction, what kind of ideas were being put out. And I felt that being here so long, I wanted to have that venue to hear and voice my opinion of what I think.

She added that, as a teacher who had been at the school for more than a decade, she had seen so many ideas come and go that she wanted to be present when decisions were being made. Another teacher at Kingston, who had more than 25 years teaching experience, explained that “there’s good work going on in the school,” but that “morale” was a concern. This teacher felt comfortable talking with administrators about “trust issues” and

making recommendations about how they could “become more part of the community.” She was participating in several committees across the school in an effort to support school improvement efforts, so participating on the vertical team was one more venue for her to work with colleagues and administrators.

Most of the members of both vertical teams suggested that, regardless of their assessment of the team’s work, they thought that having a vertical team was a good idea and, thus, they were willing to participate. Teachers on the vertical team expressed the desire to impart information or allocate resources to support their colleagues. One teacher from Kingston explained, “I think it’s very important for teachers from across grades to communicate with each other about what they do.” She hoped that the rubric the vertical team developed would be, “something that teachers have in their hands and say, ‘This helps me. This reduces my workload. This makes sense.’” Another teacher at Kingston said that she initially agreed to be on the vertical team because she thought she would have a chance to utilize her skills and expertise with other teachers:

I really like curriculum planning and, having worked in the lower grades and now in [this] grade, I felt I had a good knowledge of that vertical movement. I really liked the fact that I was given the opportunity to be on what I considered a vertical planning team to be. I never looked at it as something I didn’t want to do. I was actually grateful to have the opportunity to be part of that group.

While this teacher had become frustrated by the lack of progress made by the vertical team, she expressed some hope that the rubric would be useful. She added, “We haven’t reached that point where we’re able to see the benefit of the one product that we’ve created.”

Several teachers appreciated the opportunity to join the vertical team because they brought specific viewpoints to the meetings that they felt were important. One teacher at Kingston stated that she wanted the vertical team to compare the school's current ELA curriculum with different programs and make recommendations for which program might be appropriate for the school. At Stonebridge, one teacher hoped that she could encourage a greater focus on ELL students and familiarize teachers across the school with effective instructional practices for ELL students. Another teacher at Stonebridge wanted to ensure that the experiences of students with disabilities would be part of the vertical team's planning. She explained, "Whenever we're having conversations I really try to make sure that we keep it in the lens of, 'we're looking at a student with special needs.'" Teachers contributed their general perspectives and experiences to the vertical teams as well, but for some who represented specific groups of students, that was part of the reason they chose to participate.

Teachers at Stonebridge received an hourly rate for the time they spent with the vertical team after school. One teacher explained that she appreciated the stipend but also said,

I don't think you're doing it for the extra money, because it helps a little, but it's not like it's another paycheck. It's pocket change. I think people who are on it really want to be a part of something to help.

Time is always scarce in schools, and scheduling a meeting time when teachers from across grade levels could meet could be a significant challenge for any school. In these two cases, Administrators at Stonebridge were limited to selecting their membership from among teachers who could participate in an after-school activity and

the stipend did not seem to be a sizeable enough incentive for application for the vertical team. If vertical team membership were determined by expertise and administrators at Stonebridge wanted to select from the entire faculty, they would probably need to find a way to schedule the meetings during the contractual school day.

## Conclusion

Administrators at both schools had specific characteristics in mind for vertical team members, such as the ability to communicate effectively with colleagues, to serve as models of effective instruction, and exercise influence as teacher leaders. However, they did not clearly communicate those expectations and therefore, the characteristics were not well understood by teachers. Teachers were interested in contributing to school-wide efforts and were willing to participate on the vertical team because they wanted access to information, the opportunity to express their unique viewpoints, and the chance to contribute to school improvement. For school leaders, establishing a clear and compelling team purpose is paramount, and a thoughtful selection of team membership is the next critical piece to ensure team productivity. At both schools, membership appeared to be based on qualities such as being a good listener or being open to new ideas, rather than any specific skills or expertise. In several cases, vertical team members were chosen because they were the only grade-level volunteers or they fit a specific category such as serving as a specialty teacher. In the case of these two vertical teams, administrators could not choose members who were well-suited for the purpose because the vertical teams lacked a well-defined purpose.

Based on interviews with administrators leading both teams, it was clear that they had hopes for what the vertical team could accomplish, but lacked a thoughtful



membership selection process, which impeded these goals from being realized. While individual interviews for prospective members might have been time consuming, they would have allowed individual teachers to ask questions about the aims of the vertical team and describe their own interests in participating. In both schools, the purpose of the vertical team was in part defined by compliance with mandates, but understanding teachers' concerns and priorities might inform how to best involve teachers in the joint work of the vertical team. Learning from teachers who were interested in whole school improvement might have helped administrators recognize grade-level challenges as well as solicited input from teachers about how teachers were appraising initiatives in the school.

Moreover, during individual interviews, administrators could explain to teachers why they were being considered for membership and what administrators hoped they might contribute. In this "information rich and interactive" (Liu, 2005) interviewing process, teachers would have the opportunity to clearly understand the expectations of the role. Bypassing this process resulted in teachers who felt unsure about what they could contribute and increased the likelihood that members would be reduced to messengers rather than playing a part in diagnosing and addressing schoolwide issues.

In the next chapter, I describe the ways that the administrators of these two schools attempted to lead the vertical teams through defining the purpose of the teams and setting an environment of psychological safety for their work together.

## **Chapter 6. Leading Vertical Teams**

Administrators at both Kingston and Stonebridge had high aspirations for their schools. They wanted to foster the professional growth of teachers and to create cultural shifts so

that teachers would be encouraged to offer input and influence decisions. However, according to Edmondson (2011), such aspirations need to be closely matched with the team's goals and the participants' skills if they are to improve outcomes. Edmondson emphasizes that building and managing the work of a team requires "the deliberate exercise of leadership," (p. 75) which, in this case, would acknowledge and address the distinct challenges related to planning and discussing curriculum and instruction vertically.

Administrators did not have specific training or guidance in leading teams in general or vertical teams, in particular. The district did not appear to have resources for leaders or examples of effective vertical teams to hold out as models. As such, administrators at the two schools were using strategies that they had relied upon in the past to lead these new structures. In other words, administrators did not appear to acknowledge that the leadership of a vertical team might require different leadership strategies than facilitating grade-level teams or other committee meetings. Specifically, administrators would need to find ways to maintain a focus on schoolwide issues while encouraging teachers to provide their grade-level perspectives. Administrators would also need to highlight individual members' specific expertise because teachers from different grades rarely have the opportunity to work side by side or see each other in action. Additionally, administrators needed to think about how to make the vertical team a forum in which teachers could share their opinions, questions, or disagreement with proposals. In the case of vertical teams, administrators need to help teachers see the big picture of student development from grade-to-grade and across sub-groups including special education, ELL, and gifted and talented students.

In this chapter, I describe how these school leaders guided the work of vertical teams. For each school, I offer some background information about the overall leadership culture of the two schools and then focus on whether and how administrators engaged in leadership activities that Edmondson (2011) identified as necessary for effective teaming. In this context, questions about those leadership activities would include: First, how did leaders frame the work of the vertical team, and did that framing focus on “learning” or “execution.” Second, did administrators offer an “aspirational” frame that would help the team to persist through conflicts and challenges. Finally, Edmondson (2011) posited that psychological safety, which she defines as an environment where team members are willing to offer their opinions, share their experiences, and ask questions even in the face of uncertainty, is crucial to successful teams.

Edmondson (2011) argues that when a team is established with a “learning frame,” leaders communicate that the work ahead is “challenging, full of unknowns, and an opportunity to try out new concepts and techniques” (p. 175). In contrast, an “execution frame” posits that the team faces work that is relatively similar to the current situation and the goal is to “get the job done.” (p. 175). Edmondson (2011) further emphasizes that “team psychological safety” makes it possible for teachers to cooperate, contribute ideas and resources, and learn from mistakes. Here I look at how leaders managed conflicts during vertical team meetings as well as how teachers described their comfort with “speaking up” about their individual questions and concerns.

Edmondson (2011) focuses on specific leadership actions that develop organizational environments that foster teaming. Because the two vertical teams in my sample were still relatively new, I focus on how administrators engaged in two specific

leadership actions, “Frame the situation for learning” and “Make it psychologically safe to team” (Edmondson, 2011, p. 76). Developing a learning frame entails providing the team with an “aspirational purpose” and seeing all team members as valued partners. In a learning frame, leaders see themselves as part of the inquiry process and seek opportunities to learn as much as possible from the team’s efforts to put new ideas into action (Edmondson, 2011, p. 103). In each school, administrators struggled to translate their hopes for the vertical teams into concrete leadership actions that would sustain successful vertical teams.

The limited existing research on grade-level teams emphasizes that, even when teachers share a common group of students or subject area, successful teaming requires strong leadership to keep the group focused on their goal as well as to encourage and ensure the type of communication that allows members to discuss ideas openly. However, time and again, research both inside education (Troen & Boles, 2012; Weiner, 2014, Charner-Laird et al., forthcoming) and outside of education (Hackman, 2002; Edmondson, 2011) has found that many leaders fail to establish a clear purpose for teams. Troen and Boles (2012) found that teacher teams often set low expectations and focused on tasks such as bulletin boards and field trips rather than taking on more challenging activities, such as improving instructional practices. They note that teachers often lacked the facilitation skills or models of successful teams. Furthermore, they suggest that if teachers elected to take on a more ambitious task, they might benefit from outside expertise, but be reluctant to seek out help.

Weiner (2014), who studied four in-district charter schools that had a type of vertical team called instructional leadership teams (ILTs), found that principals had

established those teams with the broad goal of “improving instruction.” Without a clearer purpose, the ILTs focused on “immediate or short term issues” (p. 264), such as budgets, parent nights, or report card distribution, which were unlikely to support improved instructional practices.

Thus, developing a clearly articulated and aspirational purpose for vertical teams appears to be an essential element if they are going to have an impact on school improvement. In the next section, I describe how the two schools I studied established the purposes of their vertical teams. In both, administrators had ambitious hopes for what their vertical teams might accomplish, but fell short of conveying a clear purpose to those on the team. Each team took a very different approach to establishing the purpose of their work together and had different contextual challenges, but ultimately, administrators at neither school articulated a purpose for the vertical team that teachers across the school understood and supported. Related to this problem, teachers from the two schools had difficulty understanding the principal’s vision for improving instruction. This lack of clarity compromised the vertical teams’ capacity to address instruction in ways that were likely to have a positive effect across the school.

At both schools, the administrators saw the vertical team as a means for developing the knowledge of the team members with the hope that this knowledge would then be disseminated to members of grade-level horizontal teams. Furthermore, administrators hoped that vertical teams might provide a model for effective collaboration, which could influence how horizontal teams conducted their work. In some cases, teachers were not aware of this expectation and in others, teachers did not feel prepared or comfortable acting as leaders or models for their peers. Because these

expectations were not clearly set forth and membership was not selected with this purpose in mind, this goal was accomplished only in the few instances where individual teachers sought this level of influence with their colleagues.

Finally, both schools wanted vertical teams to serve as a conduit of communication from administrators to teachers. Administrators hoped that vertical team members would relay messages to teachers, but also communicate their support and willingness to try new ideas and thus influence their peers. Edmondson (2011) discusses how hierarchy tends to dampen the psychological safety of those with lower status in the group. In the cases of the vertical teams, this effect could be seen in exchanges between administrators and teachers and among teachers with different levels of seniority. Generally, hierarchy and the fear it creates, tends to limit the frequency that questions, concerns, or alternative ideas are raised in the group and constrain a team's capacity to learn (Edmondson, 2011). Furthermore, hierarchy can encourage an "execution" mentality in which teams focused on making the minimal changes necessary to consider the task accomplished (Edmondson, 2011).

### **Establishing a "Learning Frame"**

Edmondson (2011) offers three qualities of a "learning frame" (p. 103). Leaders must see themselves as interdependent with others in bringing about changes, view others as critical partners, and offer an aspirational goal for the work of teams (Edmondson, 2011). A team or a project with a learning frame makes the work, "a rewarding collaborative effort that promotes learning and innovation" (Edmondson, 2011, p. 104). Edmondson explains that more commonly, team leaders employ an "execution frame," in which leaders are seen as the knowledgeable experts who instruct their subordinates to

carry out their pre-developed plans. Rather than exploring what is unknown or trying out new ideas or strategies, an execution frame focuses on how to “get the job done” (Edmondson, 2011, p. 103). In schools, where the needs of students are immediate and ongoing, the work of teams must go one step farther in what Edmondson (2011) calls “execution-as-learning” because teachers must “learn as they go” (p. 222). For example, as teachers are given new curriculum to teach, even if they receive some initial training or support, they must continuously adjust and interpret it to meet the needs of their students.

### **Aspirational Framing versus Compliance with Mandates**

In examining how administrators described their hopes for the vertical team and how they interacted with teachers during meetings, neither vertical team was framed in a way that motivated learning-oriented collaboration. Edmondson (2011) writes, “An aspirational purpose encapsulates the excitement of doing something that aids others and helps team members endure the hardships of learning” (p. 102). In the case of schools, an aspirational purpose would reflect a desire to achieve goals for the benefit of students and the school community as a whole. Furthermore, an aspirational purpose acknowledges that learning, experimenting, and reflection will be necessary if real progress is to be achieved. In contrast, an execution frame presents problems as requiring a series of technical changes which don’t differ substantially from the status quo. At the time of data collection, both teams were engaged in a number of activities. The leadership actions taken by administrators varied, but neither group of administrators explicitly communicated an aspirational purpose that effectively motivated the teachers’ work together. While the experiences of teachers at Stonebridge and Kingston differed, administrators’ failure to frame and aspirational purpose for the teams’ work meant that

the activity of the vertical team could quickly lose its value as a learning opportunity and become simply “trying to get the work done.”

Both in this study and in the research by Weiner (2014) and Higgins et al. (2012) school leadership teams lacked this essential component of having a clear aspirational purpose. Edmondson’s (2011) scholarship on establishing a learning frame reveals that setting this purpose is not a single act, but an iterative process that involves reflection on the part of the team to refine goals and practices. When school leaders skip the initial step of framing the work of teams with a “challenging, consequential and clear” purpose (Wageman, Nunes, Burruss & Hackman, 2008, p. 17), teams are likely to falter.

My interviews with administrators at both schools led me to conclude that they were not merely enacting initiatives in order to comply with district mandates, but were genuinely trying to ensure that teachers’ experience on the school’s vertical team would yield benefits. They expressed the desire for teachers to be more “reflective” and to rely upon administrators as well as their colleagues for support. However, these convictions were not clearly communicated to teachers, who often felt like they were taking on initiatives merely to satisfy demands of the district reviewers.

### **Aspirational purpose unrealized at Kingston**

At Kingston, administrators had many aspirations related to teaching and their students. Previously they had spent an entire year focused on “growth mindset” for students and teachers. Inspired by the research of Dweck (2007), they wanted to instill in their students the belief that being “smart” is a product of effort, rather than something a student innately possesses. As Assistant Principal Keefe explained in an interview, administrators emphasized that teachers should focus on, “being really clear about your



instruction and your expectations for learning” and then, “allowing students to take ownership, to be self-reflective, to learn how to move forward because expectations are clearly stated.” When the state adopted CCLS, Kingston administrators decided that they would retain their existing ELA curriculum, which was based on units of study. They emphasized that teachers and students should exercise autonomy in selecting texts and topics of writing for authentic purposes. The ELA curriculum did not have a mandated scope and sequence or a common set of texts used across a grade level. One consequence was that teachers planned independently and, in the opinion of Assistant Principal Keefe, became focused exclusively on the “nitty gritty” of daily activities, versus “uncovering big ideas, essential questions” and “big picture instruction.” Assistant Principal Keefe was concerned that teaching was not “connected.” She pointed out, “They were working on this project or that project, but it wasn't, like, cohesion, connection, even within one class, let alone other classes.” Moreover, when asked to meet as a grade for common planning, teachers “couldn't come to the table with a common something to discuss and talk about.” She said that administrators hoped that the vertical team's rubric might provide “common language and common data” to be “something in common to talk about, to be able to work together as a team.” This would help the school to meet district expectations, but also support the changing the “tone in the building” so that teachers would have “significantly more voice across the school.”

With all of these aspirations, the administration determined that the vertical team was going to develop a K – 5 rubrics to evaluate students' informational writing. They believed a school-wide rubric would give teachers a clear picture of what qualities proficient informational writing embodied and reveal how skills should be taught

sequentially. According to Principal Kuo the vertical team's focus on informational writing would support a skill that was taught in each grade. Assistant Principal Kennedy noted that the decision to focus on informational writing was "based on the fact that there's such a push with Common Core for informational reading and writing." She added, "we knew that our classes, our school, didn't use common assessments across a grade." However Assistant Principals Kennedy and Keefe wanted the rubric to be a tool that encouraged students to "take ownership of their learning." For them, it was "just a by-product," rather than the goal of the vertical team.

However, teachers felt accountable for creating a rubric that would be useful to their peers and could show them how their teaching could meet CCLS and district requirements. Members of the vertical team were frustrated that the work had progressed so slowly and that the rubric they developed was not student-friendly. After having worked on the rubric for almost nine months, they presented a completed draft to the whole school, but by then it was difficult for vertical team members to know how to invite feedback. One vertical team member was concerned that, if teachers suggested a lot of changes, "the whole common language thing goes out the window." She emphasized, "We spent a year looking at the standards and the [curriculum]." Because in the past teachers always had the autonomy to choose their own resources, presenting a single rubric and asking the whole school to use it was a significant departure from past practice. Ultimately, the vertical team agreed to tell teachers, "We want you to use it. It's not optional." They also acknowledged that the rubric might require some revision, so they planned to ask teachers "to stick with this for a year. We've spend a lot of time

working on this.” Unfortunately, by that point, the rubric, which was intended to be a vehicle for reflection, was not open for discussion.

Administrators had aspirations for what the vertical team might accomplish, but they failed to translate those hopes into clear goals. Teachers were unaware of the administration’s interest in increasing communication or reflection. After they were allowed to work on their own, teachers completed the rubric, but there was an observable attitude of “let’s just finish something” in the discussions as the months of the project extended. If the goal of developing the rubric had been subordinate to increasing collaboration and dialogue among teachers, then, even if the rubric were less than perfect, teachers might have been reinvigorated in their work or interested in expanding conversations about writing at their grade-level teams. However, teachers were discouraged and slightly embarrassed to discuss the rubric, since it had taken so long to develop and was not considered complete by the administration. Although the vertical team members may have derived some benefit from examining standards, the rest of the teachers in the school were unlikely to learn much from implementing the rubric. Overall, the vertical team at Kingston was unable to develop a rubric that would be seen as a valuable resource for teachers or increase the dialogue or reflection among teachers about writing.

### **Missing an opportunity for aspirational framing at Stonebridge**

State reviewers mandated that teachers at Stonebridge employ more co-teaching strategies and, as a result, co-teaching was the focus of the vertical team. District reviewers expected to see the school implementing the district mandated “inquiry process” for developing strategies to address the needs of the lowest-performing students

in the grade. However, administrators still had the opportunity to establish an aspirational frame for the work and guide the team in focusing on learning. In doing so, they could transform a mandate into an occasion for learning and dialogue between teachers from different grades who didn't often have a chance to interact.

One example of this missed opportunity was the teachers' "inquiry work" at Stonebridge. Principal Sylvester had decided that the Monday after-school time designated for horizontal teams should be devoted entirely to inquiry work and said she kept that time "sacred." In the inquiry process, administrators selected the lowest-performing students in the grade and teachers were expected to collaborate to set short-term improvement goals, look closely at student work and data, and identify research-based strategies to support those individual students' growth. In theory, this activity was meant to support teachers by helping them address the needs of the most challenging students and introduce strategies that could benefit many students. Information was collected in binders and all grades filled out the same forms so that ostensibly teachers participated in a shared process that could become the basis for vertical discussions. However, most teachers described inquiry work as minimally helpful and as an activity to complete rather than something that was supporting their development. Although teachers reported out their grade-level progress on inquiry work during these meetings, these reports failed to generate rich discussions about instructional strategies that were of benefit teachers on the vertical team and across the school.

In interviews, teachers both on and off the vertical team expressed confusion and some frustration about inquiry work. One teacher on the vertical team explained, "We were given this upside-down triangle where we had to put goals. We weren't shown a

model so we didn't really know what to put on it." Another noted that with the inquiry model, "there's only a couple of classes or a couple of teachers that are being targeted." Rather than viewing inquiry as a support for addressing the needs of challenging students, she said, "you have to log and record all of your data and have paperwork to follow it. And then you might have these extra meetings where you might have to present it. So, it is extra work." She also expressed concern that the six-week cycle didn't seem long enough for her to determine if the strategy was working for students. Another teacher said, "We haven't really gotten direction. It was just kind of thrown upon us." These vertical team members were all uncertain about expectations for the inquiry process, and even though they were responsible for supporting it, none of them raised their questions during the vertical team meeting. When I asked administrators about how they had introduced the inquiry process, Assistant Principal Silver explained that she had created a two-page summary of the district developed inquiry handbook and distributed that to teachers.

I observed one vertical team meeting where teachers from each grade level reported out on their inquiry work. Each representative presented her grade's goal for the inquiry cycle. However, this reporting out did not generate questions or discussion among the teachers. Rather, vertical team members read from their prepared forms and, in some cases, the administrator leading the meeting offered a comment, but no one made comments connecting the work across the grades, even though several grades had chosen to focus on a goal related to phonics and phonemic awareness.

Several teachers said that the vertical team might provide an opportunity to learn more about the inquiry process. One vertical team member explained that, when she

asked her horizontal team if there were any issues that they wanted her to bring up during the vertical team meeting, they asked for clarification about what they should be doing in Monday inquiry meetings. The teacher noted, “I wrote it down on a piece of paper and I brought it with me [to the meeting]. But we didn’t discuss it because [we were discussing] a different topic.” Another member of the vertical team hoped that more time might be spent on deeply understanding the process of inquiry and how to support it. “We need to just focus on if we really want this inquiry thing to work with the inquiry students. This is a completely new thing. No one really knows how to do it. It just seems like everyone’s kind of figuring it out. I feel like [vertical team meetings] would be a great place to talk about it.”

Since both teachers and administrators hoped the vertical team could be a valuable conduit of communication from administrators to teachers, its meetings might have provided an opportunity for administrators to emphasize the aspirational purpose of the inquiry process. They might have led discussions that encouraged teachers to reflect on what they were learning from the inquiry cycles or what challenges they faced in working with their grade-level colleagues. They could also have emphasized the ongoing importance of the work, including highlighting individual students who had improved through the cycle or specific teaching strategies that they had observed being used in several different the grades. In turn, this enthusiasm might then have encouraged vertical team members to support the work of their colleagues. Instead the report out that I observed underscored the perfunctory completion of inquiry work rather than meaningful learning within or across grades.

In this example, the vertical team at Stonebridge had the opportunity to use vertical team time to support instructional improvement across the grades and encourage the productive use of grade-level team time. If teachers had been able to have meaningful exchanges about their goals and strategies, ask questions, and offer each other alternative viewpoints, this might have then influenced the way the grade levels used their separate inquiry meetings. Unfortunately, this discussion seemed to reinforce the notion that the school was engaging in inquiry work to satisfy district mandates rather than benefit teachers and students. Changing this activity from rote reporting out to active discussion would require encouraging teachers to speak up with their questions and share their opinions and administrators offering feedback and responses. In the next section, I analyze the elements of psychological safety that were or were not present at the meetings.

### **Psychological safety on vertical teams**

In her writing about psychological safety, Edmondson (2011) points out that, “no one can perform perfectly in every situation when knowledge and best practices are in flux” (p. 125). She notes that psychological safety is a “feature of the workplace that leaders can and must work to build” (p. 124) because it encourages learning behaviors such as, “seeking help, experimentation, and discussion of error” (p. 125). In many workplaces, individuals are afraid that speaking up or revealing mistakes publicly will make them look ignorant, incompetent, negative, or disruptive. In schools these tendencies may be further compounded by the traditional norms of teaching, including the “persistence of privacy,” which Little (1990) argues will continue because teachers can reap satisfaction from their work with students without the risks and challenges of

collaborating with colleagues in “joint work” (p. 519). Donaldson et al. (2008) added that teaching has long been defined by the norms of egalitarianism and seniority, which reinforce beliefs that all teachers should receive the same status and recognition, and that increases in salary should be based upon years of service, rather than teachers’ effectiveness. Donaldson et al. (2008) also discuss the norm of autonomy, which emphasizes individual teachers’ “right to choose what and how to teach” and to consider advice from other teachers as suggestions they are entitled to ignore. These norms, coupled with a sense in schools that there is too little time to accomplish what needs to be done, discourage speaking up, asking questions, or discussing errors. As a result, teams in schools may not arrive at a place where expertise is widely increased and used.

Vertical teams may clash with the traditional norms of seniority, autonomy, and egalitarianism to an even greater extent than horizontal teams. First, bringing together colleagues from across different grades increases the potential to “expose the work of each person to the scrutiny of others” (Little, 1990, p. 512), in this case, teachers with whom they might very rarely interact, even in collegial ways. Second, the membership selection process for the two teams allowed teachers with fewer years of experience in the teaching and less seniority at the school to both represent their grade level and serve as “instructional leaders” for their grade. Additionally, teachers were vulnerable to being judged for not adequately preparing students for the next grade. And while teams are separate structures within schools, the general level of psychological safety throughout the school influences how teachers interpret situations and activities throughout the school. Especially in the case of Kingston, teachers’ low trust of administrators was a topic that teachers throughout the school remarked on candidly in interviews.



Although the two schools' vertical teams provided opportunities for teachers to voice their opinions and even engage in debates, teachers were reluctant to bring up specific issues that impacted their daily work with students, such as the curriculum. In interviews, teachers suggested that they did not feel comfortable enough to, in Edmondson's words, "express relevant thoughts and feelings without fear of being penalized" (p. 77) in their day to day work. In fact, vertical teams might provide a context where teachers could feel even more vulnerable and hesitant to appear ignorant or disruptive. In this situation, they were with colleagues from other grades and were expected to "represent" not just themselves, but others in their grade. While administrators believed that the vertical team was an important structure to "empower" teachers and increase "teacher voice" in the school, they did not lead in ways that reassured teachers that their opinions were essential to the team's learning.

In particular, the ways that administrators handled conflicts between teachers seemed to emphasize a top-down hierarchy that may have made teachers more defensive and less inclined to work collaboratively to resolve differences. The lack of psychological safety at Kingston was pronounced and pervasive throughout the school. One teacher said that she and her colleagues believed that administrators "targeted people" and others offered examples of teachers being written up for failing to submit data on time or, as one said, "being bombarded with observations period 8 on a Friday."

The ELA curriculum was a source of ongoing conflict at Kingston between some teachers and the administrators. Teachers explained that, with their less structured curriculum, which had been developed long before the adoption of CCLS, they faced significant demands in finding materials that would meet the diverse needs of their class.

A teacher explained that since their ELA curriculum was not based on a common set of core texts, she had to “search for so long for appropriate materials.” She said that, while the search for resources was demanding for teachers, she thought it was important to “search for your own stuff, because your class might be different from another class.” Another teacher added that, because teachers searched for their own materials, the teaching could feel disjointed: “It’s piecemeal. People pull from other sources... if we all pulled from a great curriculum, imagine where we could be.” When asked if she felt comfortable making decisions about content for her classes, a teacher said, “If it’s not given to me and it’s not available, I’m going to use what I find on the Internet.” Many Kingston teachers mentioned that, when they attempted to ask questions or raise concerns, administrators sometimes would respond by referring to a teacher handbook or “giving a copy of the contract with something circled,” rather than engaging in conversations. One teacher described a time when she raised questions about the curriculum: “They got a little defensive and said, ‘We’re giving you everything you need; you only need the common core standards.’” However, this teacher wanted her colleagues and administrators to spend time “working together to come up with ideas” for what curriculum would be best and collaboratively planning units in “open communication.”

Another teacher at Kingston was emphatic that the school’s chosen curriculum was not well suited for ELL students and not aligned to CCLS. She believed that her students needed “more direct, explicit instruction” than the current program provided and that the current curriculum was, “the exact opposite of that model! It’s all independent and then a little bit of teacher feedback. We’re not addressing the needs of our

population!” Moreover, because class size at Kingston had increased, teachers pointed out that they didn’t have enough copies of books for students to use in the reading workshop model, which was a critical part of their ELA curriculum.

Principal Kuo was reluctant to change Kingston’s ELA curriculum “until we really see something that’s truly better.” She noted that, while the students could do better, “they haven’t suffered” in using the current curriculum. Assistant Principal Kennedy was concerned that teachers who requested a more structured curriculum would “stand in front of the class and read the script,” as opposed to the more whole-language focused instruction that she believed the current curriculum provided. Several years earlier the school had formed a committee to review other curriculums, but ultimately decided to stay with their current one. One teacher expressed his ongoing doubts saying, “The whole curriculum is a question for me... is that a data-based, research-based curriculum that shows children learn? I’m not so sure it is.” This teacher hoped that by developing the rubric the vertical team could support teachers to “look as a school” at how the current curriculum did or did not align with CCLS standards. Administrators expressed weariness that “a few” teachers wanted to devote more time and energy to discuss an issue they considered resolved.

Another Kingston teacher thought that administrators found teacher collaboration “threatening” and expressed concern that they moved teachers from grade levels when they thought that they “became a strong unified team that collaborates and talks and discusses.” This teacher said that if teachers were “listened to and taken seriously” it would make “a huge difference.” Principal Kuo acknowledged that in the past teachers “had a difficult time” collaborating, but that when she saw teachers using common

planning time poorly it frustrated her. In response, the administrative team sent out an all-staff memo consisting of excerpts from the teacher handbook about the use of common planning time and after school professional learning time. The memo contained no other message from the administrators, but had placed in bold text the portion of the text that said, “focus on student learning at all times, and address the teaching of specific content.” While the memo did clearly state expectations, one teacher commented, that he thought the memo conveyed a tone of “you should know this” and “it’s so obvious.” He explained that, “sometimes we need to be reminded of things. And a 50- to 60-page handbook is not an easy thing to memorize.” My interviews with teachers indicated that some teachers wanted clearer guidance on how to use their professional learning time while others had suggestions for how to use the time for the benefit of their instructional planning. When I asked administrators about this memo, they explained that this was an example of how they could communicate their expectations clearly, without realizing that some teachers perceived that distributing the memo discouraged further questions or discussion.

Teachers also expressed concerns that administrators’ expectations were inconsistent. One teacher said, “you’re never really sure when you are going to get rewarded or get slapped on the wrist.” Another explained, “We’re never complimented or noticed for all that we are doing. It’s what we’re not doing [that they comment on]. And, I think that starts to create a lot of problems as well, and the stress.”

As a result, teachers across Kingston did not feel that administrators trusted them. One teacher on the vertical team explained that when teachers across the school looked for materials to use there was always some uncertainty. “A lot of people are afraid to

make that decision, because of the fear that if you make a decision, someone's going to ask why. And then if administration didn't feel like it was appropriate, then the teacher is going to be like, 'maybe I shouldn't have decided to do that.'" Another teacher on the vertical team said, "We're just afraid to take ownership of anything because there are always these hidden expectations that they're not communicating to us, but we know are there." Yet another vertical team member noted that she didn't think that this was intentional on the part of administrators, but that "it's assumed that we already know."

Administrators were aware of the mistrust at Kingston and acknowledged it: "We definitely felt like we needed to work on school culture and have people feel like we're behind them, we support them, we're working together, versus us against you." However, they believed that a large part of the problem was caused by an individual who was no longer at the school and that "a lot's changed." The vertical team at Kingston was a hand-selected group of teachers whom administrators described as "influential." With that membership, the vertical team might have been a forum where administrators could foster speaking up, but they did not engage in actions that encouraged an open exchange of views. Teachers expressed confusion about the purpose and the productivity of the vertical team but didn't want to take those questions or concerns to the administrators. One teacher, who was confused about why she was asked to join the vertical team and what she was expected to contribute, was reluctant to ask. She believed that she got along with administrators because she wasn't "demanding or confrontational."

Many of the vertical team members at Kingston had different ideas for what the team could focus on and some had participated on similar teams at other schools, which they discussed with teachers when administrators were not present at the meetings. At

one such meeting, teachers discussed other topics they thought their team might productively focus on, such as incorporating ELL strategies into the curriculum, investigating other research-based curricula that the school might adopt, looking at strategies and materials to teach grammar, and community building or citizenship education. Many teachers agreed that focusing on supporting ELL students would be something that most teachers would find helpful. However, others were very hesitant to change the focus from rubrics since that was the task that administrators had assigned. Several teachers spoke about wanting to make contributions that would reduce the workload for all teachers across the school. But when given the opportunity to choose a different direction for their work together, teachers decided to continue writing rubrics. Although administrators had said that they were “willing to give over the reins,” in the end it did not seem that teachers felt they could risk departing from the initial objective that administrators had set, even though they found the work on the current rubric ineffectual and unsatisfying.

At one meeting when administrators were present, I observed them engaging in the type of framing and encouragement that might foster greater psychological safety. Teachers had been reflecting on possible next steps for the vertical team and the most senior teacher on the team asked, “Is the vertical team a response to the quality review or a real meaningful part of our school community?” Principal Kuo assured them that this was an opportunity to “build cohesion across the grades.” She noted that in the past teachers didn’t know “other grades’ expectations or what they were doing” and felt that this team had “established a working model” so that they could “continue working with colleagues.” Assistant Principal Keefe complimented the group on “committing to one

thing and following through.” Principal Kuo noted that the team brought together “people with leadership ability to strengthen your knowledge, understanding, and practice.” She noted that eventually it would expand to “strengthen school support.” At this meeting, teachers felt affirmed that, even though the process was difficult, it was worthwhile from the perspective of the administration. Teachers expressed relief that the administrators had attended that meeting and they felt reenergized in their work. However, because administrators did not regularly attend meetings at Kingston or offer much concrete guidance, this moment of affirmation did not extend into the next meeting, where teachers decided to proceed with rubrics.

### **Minimizing conflict at Stonebridge**

At Stonebridge, administrators developed the agenda and facilitated every meeting. Vertical team meetings were somewhat chaotic, with teachers participating in side conversations and talking over one another. Administrators would occasionally intervene to refocus the group. Team members believed that the vertical team was as one member said, composed of “a pretty strong team of people who have a lot of experience and ideas.” Another explained, “Everyone’s pretty opinionated. They’re giving their all. It’s not like we’re filtering all this stuff. We’re trying to get through to the core of all the issues that we’re facing through our instruction.” Teachers freely offered comments and suggestions and often offered resources to address a specific question or concern that a teacher might introduce.

Although teachers across the school spoke privately about the demands of combining three new literacy programs that had been introduced in the past year, they did not speak up about this issue during vertical team meetings. One teacher said, “I’m not

scared to voice my opinion, but I just feel like I don't want to be the one person that starts off that conversation.”

Teachers struggled to connect as they tried to meet CLLS standards in ELA that seemed beyond the language development of their students. The tension was apparent in one conversation that took place during a vertical team meeting. Administrators were emphasizing the importance of students having the opportunity to have “collaborative conversations.” CCLS features a K-12 “anchor standard” that says students should be able to “Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively” (<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/CCRA/SL/>).

Assistant Principal Spencer was asking team members to share strategies that they used to encourage these conversations. As a teacher began listing the questions that she suggested her students ask each other (e.g. How does the character's action show what the character is like?), Assistant Principal Silver stopped her and noted that the standard expected students to be able to ask questions “back and forth so that the questions build on each other,” and that they should participate in a “dialogue” where students can “challenge or justify.” Another teacher then commented, “My students are so not ready for this.” The teachers seated immediately around her challenged her and asked questions about whether she was using visuals to support the questions and how she was grouping students. A teacher of a previous grade asked for the names of students that her colleague believed were not capable of meeting the standard and then, based on her own experiences with those students, argued that she thought they could. At that point in the meeting many, of the teachers were also having side conversations. Feeling the



tension in the room, Assistant Principal Silver stopped the side conversation by saying, “Now that we are in the strategy sharing phase of our meeting...” She then asked another teacher to offer strategies that they used successfully. She continued by explaining that they would be given time to develop a lesson plan to demonstrate how they used these strategies to support student led conversations as a “model classroom we can come visit.” The teacher who expressed doubts about her student’s readiness quietly asked, “I thought we had the option?” seeming to indicate her reluctance to be observed.

In this example, the vertical team seemed to be fulfilling the aspiration of allowing teachers to discuss strategies across grades in order to meet a school-wide standard. However, this exchange demonstrates some of the unique challenges of the vertical structure. First, this conversation opened the teacher who expressed doubt in her students’ abilities to the scrutiny of other more experienced teachers who earlier had taught some of the students their colleague had mentioned. This type of challenge would be unlikely to occur at a grade level meeting. Second, the administrator facilitating the meeting did not ask the teacher to clarify her comment, and as a result, teachers who responded seemed to be reacting to her comment as a universally applied “deficit frame,” viewing all ELL students as incapable. Rather, I believe this teacher was bringing up her concern that some of her students who were recent arrivals to the country with very limited English vocabulary were not developmentally ready to participate in the type of back and forth dialogue that was required by the standard. Based on my interviews with the three teachers involved in this exchange and teachers across the school, this concern was widespread. However, in this instance, the exchange was experienced by the first teacher as a challenge to her competence. Edmondson (2011) explains that in

psychologically safe environments making a mistake or asking for help doesn't mean that "others will penalize or think less of them" (p. 118). She argues that when speaking up in a group, individuals will always evaluate the personal risk involved, by asking, "Will I be hurt, embarrassed or criticized?" (p. 120). If the goal of this team is learning—in this case, learning how to improve instruction—then Edmondson (2011) asserts that speaking up and supporting productive conflict are two essential team behaviors. She also emphasizes the need for a psychologically safe environment in order to recognize that "no one can perform perfectly in every situation when knowledge and best practices are in flux" (p. 125). In this example, the administrators facilitating the meeting focused on successes (or at least the strategies that the teachers were using with seeming success). They did not acknowledge that there was no easy answer to how students with beginning levels of English language development were going to be able to meet the standard. Edmondson refers to this as "acknowledging the limits of current knowledge" and notes that many leaders are reluctant to "publicly express that they don't have the answers to every issue or challenge." By permitting teachers to address the comment as an individual teacher's problem without framing her concerns as part of a school-wide struggle, the administrator might have made teachers who observed the exchange less likely to bring up their own concerns. Thus, rather than engaging in discussions about the needs of students and the standards that might affect a large percentage of students at Stonebridge, the teachers reverted to offering a list of questions and strategies. While this might have been useful for some teachers, administrators missed the learning opportunity of this exchange and compromised the psychological safety of those on the vertical team.

Administrators at the two schools did not have formal training in leading teams, though their range of experience varied. All of the administrators had worked previously as instructional coaches and some had strong facilitation skills. However, it is unlikely that any of them would have been exposed to theories and practices related to providing psychological safety. If these teams are intended to make progress in addressing difficult and uncertain challenges that benefit from multiple perspectives, then fostering psychological safety is vital. Administrators might start by understanding the interpersonal risk that speaking up involves and encouraging it. They can help other team members learn to reframe conversations as exploring issues where their knowledge is incomplete.

## **Conclusion**

If teams continue to proliferate in schools, it will be important to develop administrators' capacity to support them. In this study, administrators did not frame the work of teams with an aspirational purpose or create psychologically safe environments for meetings. Vertical teams can foster the sharing of teacher expertise and support greater collaboration across the school only if they have dedicated leadership that is focused on achieving a clear and aspirational purpose. Absent this leadership, even teachers who were initially eager to participate will lose interest and commitment.

## **Chapter 7. The Practices of the Vertical Team**

Katzenbach & Smith (1993) emphasize that effective teams agree upon a "clear working approach" (p. 63) that supports efficient communication and ensures that the group is able to prioritize achieving its goals. They argue that clear rules of behavior

about issues like attendance, confidentiality, discussions, and what each member is expected to contribute “promote focus, openness, commitment, and trust” (p. 123). They posit that a failure to set and follow basic rules “signals that the group may not be able to manage even the simplest of details, let alone conquer its performance challenge” (p. 123).

In this chapter I present an analysis of the practices that were apparent during team meetings, including how meetings were structured, who led them, who participated, and what issues were resolved during them. Overall, Stonebridge’s vertical team meetings had more formal structures in place, while its counterpart at Kingston had no set meeting structure. Stonebridge had informal group norms, but Kingston’s meetings had more formal interactions among teachers. Administrators led Stonebridge’s meetings, while teachers led most of Kingston’s meetings, without the presence of administrators. Neither team appeared to have a formal set of group norms or specific roles (such as note taking or time keeping functions). At the time of data collection, vertical team meetings at Kingston were often unfocused and leaderless. Since administrators facilitated meetings at Stonebridge, the hierarchy this conveyed meant that many of the possible benefits of having teachers from each grade were unrealized.

### **Lost and “Losing Steam” at Kingston**

At Kingston, I observed two meetings where administrators facilitated the discussions and five meetings that were teacher-led. Assistant Principal Kennedy attended one of those five meetings and contributed as a participant, but did not serve as the facilitator.

Kingston’s vertical team meetings occurred during first period in a classroom and

lasted 50 minutes. Generally, team members were on time and meetings started promptly. Based on a review of meeting notes, when administrators led the team meetings during the first months there was a process that included reviewing an agenda for each meeting, reading the previous week's minutes, and assigning roles for note taking and time keeping. At teacher-led meetings there was no agenda set prior to meetings, nor any process to review the minutes of the previous week's meeting. Some weeks a teacher volunteered to take notes, but it was not consistent from meeting to meeting and the completeness of the notes varied significantly.

When they initiated the vertical team, Assistant Principal Kennedy recalled: "We committed a lot of time and effort into trying to norm our goals and expectations and define the work with the group." Administrators asked the vertical team members questions such as, "Who are we? Why are we here? What's our charge?" Minutes from the second meeting of the vertical team show that they discussed a "shared vision/belief for our work." The notes indicate that vertical team members were expected to be "representatives of grade colleagues as well as leaders in this work." Notes also recorded that a goal of the vertical team was to "make stronger connections across the grades and bridge gaps" to improve student achievement.

Both assistant principals believed that they had set a strong foundation of team building for the work of the vertical team. In contrast, several teachers on the vertical team said that they felt confused by the initial discussions and were concerned that not much was accomplished in them. One teacher said that the administrators "tend to be more philosophical" and spend time "talking about all these random things instead of being productive and looking at the work and getting it done." After a month of meetings,

the shared vision of Kingston's vertical team was articulated and recorded in the notes:

"As a community, we believe the differentiated use of rubrics will provide common language for families, teachers, and students to build a culture of self-reflective learners."

However, seven months after they had written this vision statement, I asked teachers and administrators to interpret it for me. They had difficulty explaining both what it meant and its relevance to the work they were doing. Teachers did not recall writing it and could not suggest ways that it had guided their work.

Assistant Principal Kennedy stated, "In the beginning, we definitely ran or facilitated the meetings, and we put together the agenda prior to the meeting. And it started to change—I mean, once we got into the work, we just knew what we were going to be doing next." Assistant Principal Keefe explained that one purpose of the vertical team structure was to "incorporate more teacher voice across the school." However, teachers on the vertical team did not know the rationale for selecting informational writing rubrics as their focus and expressed concern that administrators might simply veto the rubric they developed. Several team members did not believe that the administrators really wanted their input. One asked, "Do [administrators] want us to really do what we think we should do in terms of helping out our school, or do you just want to dictate?" Another member of Kingston's vertical team described the group as "steered" and observed, "we're told we have autonomy, but we [really don't]."

After approximately seven months of meetings, administrators and teachers at Kingston decided that teachers were more "comfortable" and "productive" when administrators were not present at the meetings. The assistant principals thought that they could show teachers that they trusted them to take ownership of the work. One teacher

said that “Once the administration took a step back we were able to make decisions and move ahead with the project.” However, while vertical team members may have felt like they were getting more done, they did not feel secure that their rubric would be acceptable to the administrators. One vertical team member explained that as a group the vertical team was “fearful that they’re just going to tell us that’s not what they want.” She added, “For them to say that it’s not correct, then that just shows there’s no purpose for a vertical team. Then they should just be doing it themselves.” Another vertical team member said, “They had a goal in mind but they weren’t necessarily giving us that goal. I felt like they were trying to get us to be on the same page as them without ultimately saying ‘This is what I want you to do.’ So, it kind of seemed like it was coming more from us, but it was really what *they* wanted.”

In fact, when teachers reviewed their rubric with the school’s literacy coach, she noted that it still wouldn’t be specific enough to alleviate the need for individual teachers to create additional checklists of specific teaching points. One vertical team member said that the feedback “felt like a blow to us.” She explained that she and the rest of the team hoped that the rubric would be “something that teachers have in their hands and say, ‘This helps me. This reduces my workload. This makes sense.’ What’s the point of developing a general rubric if it’s not going to minimize work for teachers?” By December of 2015, teachers on the vertical team began expressing their concerns. One teacher asked, “Are we the rubric team or are we the vertical team?”

Because the teachers had requested that they lead the vertical team without the presence of administrators six months after it began, one teacher who volunteered had been designated as the “liaison” between the administration and the vertical team. In

addition, she initiated the discussion at three of the five teacher-led meetings. One vertical team member explained that two members seemed to take turns leading, but she said, “I don’t know if they were asked or they just assumed that role.” At times, it was unclear who was facilitating the teacher-led meetings. While the designated teacher liaison initiated the conversation, most of the meetings functioned as unstructured discussions on a variety of instructional topics. At one meeting, the teacher liaison led a “hopes and fears” protocol where teachers wrote their “greatest hopes and greatest fears related to vertical teams.” Teachers expressed fears that the rubric work would not be relevant or useful to teachers and dissatisfaction about the lack of influence teachers had in deciding the priorities of the vertical team. A teacher asked the assembled team, “Do you feel like this is a waste of time every week?”

During the meetings, the teachers engaged in unstructured discussions related to the team’s work, school leadership, and their colleagues’ perception of the rubric. Occasionally they would project the rubric onto the screen and make changes in response to suggestions during the meeting. Two of the meetings I observed were dedicated to planning a whole-school presentation that would take place during the afterschool teacher collaboration time. In one they discussed the “next steps” for the vertical team once the rubric had been completed. After that discussion one teacher admitted, “I’m losing steam. What’s the point of anything? I really do think that we need to [create an] agenda [with] goals and in this month [decide] we’re going to accomplish these things.” In spite of their desire to hold meetings without administrators, teachers expressed feeling lost, frustrated, and losing the motivation to continue.



After that meeting, all three administrators attended the meeting the following week. Principal Kuo praised the work of the vertical team and pointed out that prior to the creation of the vertical team teachers didn't know "other grade expectations or what they were doing." She assured them that the team was composed of people with "leadership ability" for the purpose of "strengthening your knowledge, understanding and practice" for their benefit and to "hopefully strengthen school support." Assistant Principal Keefe added, "We are amazed by the work." As the meeting concluded Assistant Principal Kennedy explained, "We are happy to be here every Friday, or we're fine with not being here... we are open, but we won't just show up. Ask us when you want us back." A teacher thanked them for coming and said, "We needed this conversation."

According to notes, two weeks after the meeting with administration, the vertical team asked their grade level colleagues "what they felt the focus of the vertical team's work should be." Based on these discussions, they decided to continue writing rubrics for the remainder of the school year. Notes from the meeting a week later recorded a discussion in which teachers discussed several other ideas for the vertical team's focus. These included how to "take advantage of our personnel to incorporate ELL strategies in our curriculum;" "decrease the time that staff has to search for appropriate materials, curriculum, etc.;" "purchase a curriculum with materials for EVERY class so teachers are not always searching for materials and people could be on the same page;" and "creating a curriculum like a grammar curriculum." It was not recorded whether the team decided which suggestion they wanted to continue discussing. They did record that they needed to "set specific agenda goals," and they planned to invite administration to the next meeting

to discuss the future direction of the vertical team.

During interviews, administrators said that they perceived these types of discussions to be part of the work of building a team. They suggested that such “big picture” discussions were helping teachers find “their voice” and develop the capacity to communicate with one another. Clearly, teachers were expressing their concerns about additional supports they believed teachers needed, but it was doubtful that they were learning anything new from these discussions. More important, the time and energy that teachers might have been devoted to discussing the substance of these issues was used to debate the merit of various topics. In attempting to give teachers “ownership” of their work, administrators had left them to establish both the team’s purpose and to arrive at effective meeting practices, such as assigning roles and developing agendas. It is notable that even though the members wanted to lead themselves, they still required the approval of administrators to proceed with any of their ideas. Because administrators were not part of formative discussions, their role was restricted to that of giving or withholding approval. If they disagreed with the way that the vertical team defined its new purpose, then they would be in a position of taking power away from teachers, which would likely increase the mistrust that many teachers felt. The lack of leadership on the Kingston vertical team ultimately compromised its effectiveness and members’ desire to continue their work.

Based on my observation and interviews with teachers and administrators, the informational writing rubric was intended to promote discussion about the progression of skills as students moved from grade to grade and to help teachers commit to those expectations. This seemed to be an appropriate task for the vertical team because it was

focused on instruction and teachers from each grade could contribute their ideas and opinions. However, the group was stymied by a lack of leadership and trust. In order to be more successful, the vertical team might have considered discussing who should lead the meetings and what interim products of their work they team worked for months on a product that did not appear to be accepted by either their peers or administrators.

Administrators also hand-selected this team of teachers that “they could work with,” in the hopes of building stronger relationships more broadly with teachers. When they stopped attending meetings, that opportunity for building trust through the vertical team was lost. They said that allowing the team meetings to take place without them conveyed trust, but teachers did not suggest that they felt more trusted. Rather, several teachers explained that they felt less constrained in sharing their opinions and more capable of focusing on completing the rubric. Building trust, especially in the case of Kingston where relationships between teachers and administrators had been strained, seemed to require, at a minimum, a willingness to spend time together. If the rubric that the vertical team produced was ultimately incomplete, the teachers might feel disrespected and disregarded rather than trusted.

### **Coaching and Reporting Out at Stonebridge**

At Stonebridge, vertical teams met twice a month after school for 90 minutes. Meetings were held in the teachers’ workroom, where teachers ate lunch, held meetings, and prepared for class. Meetings were scheduled to start at 2:45, but teachers trickled in and usually socialized and ate or got coffee for a while before the meeting actually started. Some teachers brought piles of papers that they graded while they waited for the meeting to begin. On some occasions the meeting started as late as 3:15 pm.

During a separate meeting, administrators set a simple agenda of topics to be discussed, which was printed and distributed at the start of the meeting. Unlike Kingston, where the vertical team focused solely on informational writing rubrics, the topics for discussion varied from meeting to meeting. The meeting that I observed focused on co-teaching strategies, grade level inquiry-work, and student-led collaborative discussions. One of the two Assistant Principals facilitated the meeting each week. Notes were occasionally taken if someone remembered to volunteer, but they varied in completeness. There were not any other designated roles for the teachers.

Vertical meetings were always in large-group format. The six that I observed had two formats. In one, an assistant principal led the group in a professional development workshop session; in the other, teachers provided reports on their grade's activities. Most of the exchanges in the meeting were administrator to teacher or teacher to administrator. Teachers did speak to one another, but this was primarily in side conversations that were not audible to the whole group. Multiple side conversations occurred frequently and it was not unusual for the Assistant Principal to raise her voice and refocus the group. From what I could hear, most of the teachers' side conversations were related to the topic at hand rather than unrelated topics.

At the time of data collection, vertical team members were learning about co-teaching models that would enable them to increase small group work that was targeted to students' needs. District reviewers had identified whole class instruction as an ineffective method for addressing the range of students' learning abilities in each classroom. In particular, administrators wanted to see instructional aides, ELL specialists, and special education teachers, who were assigned to push into the classroom, actively

engaged in providing instruction. In classrooms with only one teacher, administrators wanted students to work in small groups at “stations” that enabled more active participation and less passive listening to teachers.

In order to support these strategies, Assistant Principal Spencer spent one vertical team meeting describing the co-teaching models and responding to questions about the difference among the models and the various ways that student groups might be configured. The administrators set up a schedule so that all the members of the vertical team could observe in several special education classrooms across the grade levels where the co-teaching model had already been implemented for one year.

Then Assistant Principal Spencer facilitated a discussion about what teachers observed. She told the vertical team, “You are responsible for knowing what the push is in the school and being able to express and explain the rationale behind the use of those three models.” She noted that the teachers they observed all had strengths and weaknesses, but that they were working to apply the co-teaching models in their classrooms. Spencer added that teachers might respond, “I do that already,” but that the vertical team member had to, “review and go through” the models. “It’s not just delivering the information. I think they are going to have questions,” she added. Since the school had been rated “developing” in the area of small group instruction, Spencer said that co-teaching was going to be a “huge push” and was “becoming a non-negotiable.” She anticipated that teachers would have questions and want to see others engaged in co-teaching, so she initiated classroom observations of co-taught classrooms with the vertical team in the hopes that teachers could ask questions, have conversations as colleagues, and “work on this together.” She also explicitly stated the hope that, soon, if

other teachers wanted to observe the vertical team members' using the strategies in their classrooms, they would show others "how it's done."

Throughout the presentation, teachers took notes and occasionally asked questions. One teacher raised an example of a student with behavioral difficulties and asked for suggestions about how to incorporate him into the model. Another asked what time during the day would be ideal for employing stations. When teachers related their observations of co-taught classrooms, Assistant Principal Spencer might ask for a specific example or for the group to identify which model the teacher was using. Teachers were not invited to raise objections to expanding co-teaching and no teacher registered objections. Some teachers asked questions to clarify how much they were expected to co-teach if they did not have another teacher in the classroom and when they were expected to begin using the strategies. In interviews, teachers seemed open to trying the suggested strategies, and they also recognized that since this requirement was coming from state and district evaluators they needed to implement it.

Reporting on specific grade level activities was another common activity during Stonebridge's vertical team meetings. For example, in one meeting a teacher from each grade gave examples of some questions that they provide to students to guide their "collaborative conversations." During this report out, teachers generally read from a list of activities they had done with their classes. The Assistant Principal occasionally asked a clarifying question. Teachers sometimes offered brief comments, but there was very little teacher-to-teacher discussion.

Administrators at Stonebridge clearly had important content to discuss with teachers and when they were in coaching mode teachers were attentive and engaged.

However, all teachers at the school would have benefitted from learning directly from Assistant Principal Spencer, who had a deep understanding of the co-teaching models, rather than relying on the information that the vertical team members relayed. In interviews teachers expressed varying levels of confidence in their own knowledge of co-teaching. Some said that they would feel comfortable leading a training and serving as a model and some were adamant that they were only responsible for conveying the expectation. Teachers were more enthusiastic about the opportunity for their peers to engage in the peer observations of classrooms with established co-teaching practices.

My interviews and analysis revealed that both co-teaching and the inquiry process were central to the school's plan for instructional improvement and therefore suitable initiatives for the vertical team to discuss. However, in order for these discussions to advance the schoolwide goals more effectively, administrators needed to offer more support to their vertical team members. For example, administrators might have considered co-leading a session with vertical team members or other teachers in the school who had been well trained in co-teaching to smaller groups of teachers. Depending on their roles and relationships on horizontal teams, several vertical team members mentioned that they would report the new mandate to the grade, but have very little opportunity to share the specific coaching regarding the co-teaching models.

Similarly, the reporting out activities that teachers engaged in did not provoke discussion amongst teachers. Teachers may not have had sufficient context for understanding what their peers were reporting on, or they may have regarded it as a compliance exercise that lacked relevance to their teaching. Administrators might have set up partner discussions so that, for example, second and third grade teachers could

discuss their inquiry work in depth and compare the goals and strategies they had developed. They might also have used the discussion to develop clarifying questions about the process that would increase the fidelity of implementing the inquiry process schoolwide.

## Conclusion

At the time of data collection, vertical teams lacked some of the basic structures of effective meetings, which would have allowed for the efficient use of time and encouraged the robust participation by all the team members. The roles that administrators played appeared to affect the clarity and regularity of the vertical teams' processes and practices. At Kingston, teachers were left in isolation to figure out a way to work productively. Administrators at Kingston believed that this was part of the process of building a team, when in actuality teachers were frustrated and discouraged by meetings without a clear agenda or dedicated facilitator. At Stonebridge, vertical team meetings were used for coaching and reporting out functions that seemed to minimize interaction between teachers. While the meetings were informal and often lively, teachers seemed to prefer discussing issues in side conversations with the teachers sitting nearby than contributing to large group discussions. Both teams kept notes intermittently, but even those were rarely consulted. While these details may seem minor, the absence of basic working agreements affected who participated and what the team was able to accomplish. Vertical team meetings did not need to be formal and rigidly structured, but a clearer set of norms for discussion, systematic ways to capture and build upon what the team had discussed, and facilitation that supported robust participation would have strengthened the work of the teams.



## **Chapter 8. Discussion and Implications**

In urban schools that serve large numbers of students in poverty, the demands for school improvement are frequently accompanied by new initiatives and programs that require administrators and teachers to work together for implementation. Piecemeal efforts to implement initiatives can result in an uneven instructional program for students and frustration and dissatisfaction among teachers. School leaders are seeking structures that allow them to guide teachers' collaboration and professional learning in ways that ensure that teachers maximize the benefits of common planning times and grade level meetings. Recent studies on teams in schools have established that teachers value the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues (Charner-Laird et al. (forthcoming), Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014) and that teacher collaboration can have a positive effect on both teacher effectiveness and student performance on outcome measures (Ronfeldt et al., 2015). However, the implementation of teacher teams has been found to be uneven within schools (Charner Laird et al. (forthcoming), Troen & Boles, 2012), at least in part because engaging in joint work deviates significantly from the well-established norms of schools in which teachers have the autonomy to decide how to teach (Donaldson et al. 2008; Little, 1990; Hargreaves, 2007).

The research on instructional leadership teams suggests an additional set of challenges related to bringing together educators from diverse roles, often roles which are farther removed from the work of the classroom, to determine how to improve instruction at scale (Higgins, Weiner & Young, 2012; Weiner, 2014). Vertical teams, which include teachers from each grade in the school who meet on a regular basis to discuss instructional improvement, hold much allure for administrators who are looking for ways

to manage change, maximize resources, and create a coordinated, cohesive educational program for students. Vertical teams present the opportunity for administrators to communicate current schoolwide priorities, understand the challenges of each grade, and share information and resources to be distributed throughout the school. They might allow teachers to learn from each other, develop leadership skills, and contribute to diagnosing and addressing schoolwide challenges. However, previous research points to the crucial role that school leaders play in ensuring these teams' success. If vertical teams are a new and untested team structure in schools, then they may require a distinct type of leadership expertise to take root and flourish.

Using Edmondson's (2011) theories on teaming, I used qualitative research methods to examine the work of two vertical teams, established in two large, urban elementary schools that served large numbers of students in poverty and significant numbers of ELL students. These teams were in the early stages of development when I sought to understand what motivated administrators to create vertical teams, how they went about selecting the team members, and how they established the goals of the team. At each school I found that administrators had many hopes that their vertical team would address ongoing challenges they faced, including serving the needs of ELL students while also meeting the requirements of CCLS. Further, they hoped to establish better communication and foster teacher leadership. I also wanted to learn whether and how teachers found participating on the vertical team beneficial for their own teaching practices and their work with colleagues. Additionally, I hoped to learn whether teachers throughout the school, who did not serve on the vertical team, found the work of the team helpful to their instruction.

At both schools, administrators saw vertical teams as providing an opportunity to demonstrate compliance with district accountability requirements. Broadly, they wanted the vertical teams to support teachers by building their capacity, both as teachers and leaders. However, neither set of administrators established a “learning frame” (Edmondson, 2011) that encouraged teachers to work as partners with administrators. Rather, the teams engaged in a series of activities that, from the teacher’s perspectives, were less useful than they expected. Most of the activities fell short of benefitting from the vertical representation of the team. In the case of Kingston Elementary School, deep-seated mistrust between administrators and teachers affected the work of the vertical team, even though administrators hoped that the team could serve to restore positive relationships. At Stonebridge Elementary School, administrators led some meetings as coaching sessions that teachers found engaging. However, the expectation that teachers would then share the knowledge they gained from those sessions with their peers was largely unrealized. Instead, as they attended their grade-level meetings, teachers from the vertical teams tended to report about what had been discussed at vertical team meetings, but did not have enough time or the inclination to explore what they learned in depth. At both schools, teachers on vertical teams wanted to participate in order to contribute to the growth of the school, offer support to their colleagues, and hear their administrators’ priorities and expectations first hand. At the time of data collection, vertical teams had not yet been accepted by teachers as an effective means of school improvement.

Administrators at the two schools did not have expertise, guidelines or support in establishing and leading vertical teams. At the time of the study, there were no models or examples of best practices to refer to as they established their teams. Administrators

seemed to rely on the same strategies they had previously used in whole staff meetings or on grade level teams. That is, they assigned tasks and supervised their execution, or they led teachers in reporting out on their activities. Even the teachers at Kingston, who held meetings without administrators present, seemed more preoccupied with ensuring that the rubric they were creating would meet the administrator's expectations than with learning from each other. If one of the goals of the vertical teams was to establish a cadre of effective teachers who would work together to solve some of the school's most pressing instructional issues, then much of the expertise of the teachers who gathered in the meetings remained untapped.

#### Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

This study reveals some of the potential and pitfalls of implementing a vertical team strategy in schools, which is a relatively new and largely unstudied phenomenon. While my study focused on only two elementary schools, examining these two cases of implementation reveals the important role of leadership and the challenges of organizational learning in settings where student populations are complex and demands on schools are increasing.

#### **Implications for District Policymakers and School Administrators**

This study reveals that district level policies that require schools to develop new structures, such as vertical teams, might motivate principals, but not necessarily provide the support to implement them well. In 2015, when I conducted this research, the challenge of implementing CCLS was omnipresent in teachers' conversations about instruction, but large gaps remained in their knowledge about how to implement those standards with students who had limited English proficiency. Teachers reported having

little faith that the state's standardized test would accurately assess whether students had acquired some of the critical thinking skills that the new standards required, and rumors abounded that the entire test was undergoing a complete overhaul. The district was investing in teacher collaboration by adding paid time for grade-level team professional learning. At the two schools in my sample, teachers wanted to establish their own goals for their professional learning time, but what teachers did during those hours was set by administrators. At both schools there were examples of grade level teams that were struggling to use their time effectively. My findings concur with previous literature on teams that argue that simply establishing teams is no guarantor of teacher collaboration or joint work (Little, 1990; Troen & Boles, 2012). Vertical teams, which are further removed from the day-to-day work of classrooms and bring together teachers who have few opportunities to work together, may present even greater barriers to collaboration.

If district leaders want vertical teams to proliferate and function well, they might consider offering funding to a small number of schools and selecting sites with strong principal leadership and well-established grade level teams. Focusing on a small number of pilot sites would allow district leaders to understand what contributes to successful implementation and develop clearer guidelines for best practices in vertical teams, which emerge from schools that engage successfully in vertical teaming practices. Edmondson (2011) argues that team leadership requires a departure from the hierarchical, command and control models of leadership still prevalent in many schools. However, most schools remain hierarchical in practice, in part because a district's expectations for accountability demand that administrators respond. At a minimum, district officials should encourage and support teachers and administrators who want to develop their skills in leading teams,

both horizontal and vertical. Districts might begin by offering ongoing workshops on leading teams, develop professional working groups who come together to discuss vertical teams at different stages of development, and provide coaches who can consult with and observe vertical teams and provide specific feedback.

Districts should also consider the time and resources that vertical teams require prior to encouraging their creation. Lack of time for teachers to collaborate remains a major obstacle for effective horizontal teams, and adding an additional vertical team requires even more resources and coordination of schedules. District policymakers should carefully consider the mandates they currently place on the use of teachers' professional development time and determine whether it is reasonable to add another team structure that could meet frequently enough to improve student learning. It is possible that vertical teams require time that neither administrators or teachers find they can afford to lose. Since the work of vertical teams is removed from the classroom, protecting that time for the purpose of looking at issues that teachers described as "philosophical" can be hard to defend. Teachers in these two schools continued to prioritize their classrooms and students. Their aggravation in the face of so many new initiatives meant that vertical teams were a lower priority for many members. There appeared to be no easy solution for the scarcity of time to collaborate in these two schools, particularly when teachers did not find the vertical teams to be effective.

Finally, although Monument District had already made both teacher leadership and teacher collaboration areas for evaluation in their district reviews, the mandates in and of themselves did not appear to be sufficient to change deeply rooted hierarchical practices. Encouraging teachers and administrators to work collaboratively together

might require more technical assistance from districts or unions to correspond with the higher expectations for teamwork.

Districts can mandate the creation of vertical teams, but the successful implementation of teams depends on the unique features of the school: its leaders, teachers, and the challenges they face. In my study, the role of school leaders was the most important component of vertical teams and often it was inadequate in establishing vertical teams that were focused on learning. The school administrators' success in establishing the team's purpose, selecting the team's members, and then establishing the team's practices determined the fate for the vertical teams in both schools. Administrators were proud that they had established vertical teams and believed that they represented progress for the school in coordinating its educational program. They had high hopes that vertical teams would show teachers that they valued their input and viewed them as a conduit for teacher-to-teacher communication. However, administrators ultimately perceived vertical teams as just another initiative to implement and thus missed out on creating a team that was focused on learning, with teachers as partners.

The expectation that administrators should be experts in leading teacher teams is relatively new, and the experience of leading vertical teams is completely novel. Administrators deserve the opportunity to understand more about what makes for effective teams, including establishing a clear purpose that will continue to motivate the team in spite of challenges. Because principals tend to work in even greater isolation than teachers, establishing professional learning groups for administrators to learn more about effective team leadership would allow them to learn alongside colleagues who face many of the same challenges.

Through interviews with teachers, I learned that they were reluctant to voice their questions and concerns with administrators and each other. Edmondson (2011) argues that this fear inhibits the potential for teams to become sources of innovation and adaptation, which complex organizations require. She maintains that leaders must reinforce the fact that the team is confronting problems with no easy answers and that developing strategies to address them will require reflecting on past mistakes and the willingness to take risks.

In interviews, teachers raised questions and concerns about what was happening in the school, but they did not raise them during vertical team meetings. They believed that going along with the group was part of being a good team member. However, their concerns tended to focus on the most significant aspects of their work with students, such as the curriculum or training related to a specific teaching strategy. These unspoken concerns deserved attention. In an effort to elicit them, administrators might have solicited more input from teachers about their top priorities in developing the goals and agenda for the vertical meeting. Because vertical teams had representatives from all grades, learning this could reveal which issues were the most relevant across the school. Instead, administrators chose to focus on the district's requirements, signaling to teachers that vertical teams were intended to demonstrate compliance rather than respond to their priorities as representatives of their grade-level colleagues.

This study suggests that vertical teams require even greater levels of trust and openness than horizontal teams because they are composed of teacher who do not work together on a regular basis. They open teachers to judgement from peers that they have somehow failed to prepare their students or are not maintaining high expectations.



Besides incorporating team- building activities and establishing and enforcing clear group norms, it would be beneficial if administrators could engage teachers on the team in opportunities to know each other, explaining, then demonstrating, what expertise they bring to the group. When considering the practices of vertical teams, alternating between small group and large group format would encourage greater teacher-to-teacher interaction and help to build relationships. The large group format seemed to emphasize hierarchy and limit the participation of all but the most confident and outspoken teachers.

Many teachers on the vertical team expressed the genuine desire to support their colleagues. They were committed to finding instructional solutions for their underperforming students and never resorted to blaming students, their communities, or poverty for poor outcomes. Their dedication to improving as teachers and supporting schoolwide change helped them to persist with their work on the vertical team, even when they were frustrated and discouraged. Administrators may have been aware of the teachers' commitment or taken it for granted, but if they had publicly acknowledged it, this resolve might have motivated the team's purpose to learn more from each other.

Some teachers contended that administrators were focusing on activities or tasks to avoid answering some of their larger concerns about how to meet CCLS standards with their students. By sidestepping the most critical issue that teachers faced on a daily basis, administrators lost credibility with teachers. Questions about how to adapt curriculum to meet students' needs do not lend themselves to quick and easy answers. Instead, even beginning to address them requires data, analysis, and reflection and possibly outside expertise. Further, teachers must take risks to develop innovative practices, both of which are unfamiliar in most schools. Vertical teams may be a structure that can support

organizational learning, but the leadership, membership, and practices involved in enacting them will determine whether or not learning occurs.

### **Implications for Research**

Vertical teams are a relatively new phenomenon that has received very little research attention, but deserves more. Practitioners and policymakers need to learn for what purposes vertical teams are promising, and under what circumstances. Research could reveal more about what is required in order for vertical teams and school leaders to successfully address the challenges of organizational learning in schools.

Since most vertical teams are still in their early stages of development and relatively rare, qualitative methods, such as case studies and survey methods, would be instrumental in developing our understanding of how these teams work. Ideally, this foundational research could examine the practices of vertical teams that are better established as well as those just starting, paying close attention to the relationships between teachers and administrators.

In this study, I have identified several key factors that influenced the effectiveness of the vertical teams—having a clear purpose, appropriate membership, safe learning environment, and basic practices. Future case studies might also focus on how administrators established the team’s purpose, selected members, and the led the practices of the team. In my study, I learned that horizontal teams in both schools varied significantly in their effectiveness, as did levels of trust between teachers and administrators. Finding case study schools where horizontal teams have been assessed by teachers as highly effective, or schools where trust between principals and teachers is

strong might yield more insight into the necessary conditions for vertical teams to be successful.

At Kingston and Stonebridge, the routine practices of the two teams, such as the development of group norms, the creation of agendas, or the facilitation techniques differed significantly. Future cases could focus closely on the practices of the vertical teams that contribute or detract from the team's productivity. Research could highlight the practices that seemed to generate more interaction, the introduction of new ideas, or reflection on missteps. This type of implementation research would be extremely valuable to practitioners who currently have minimal guidance about the types of practices would increase their team's success.

Monument District officials were eager to encourage more vertical teams throughout the district. However, prior to committing valuable time and resources to these teams, the district might consider a research-practice partnership that offered embedded implementation support to schools implementing vertical teams and allowed for ongoing research as the teams formed and began their work. The principals in this study were eager for feedback about what they could do to improve their teams. They wanted to encourage teacher leadership, but they lacked the understanding and leadership skills to enact it. The principals in my study would have valued the opportunity to work with a leadership coach from the district and a researcher to continue to refine their implementation.

The Monument district conducted annual school climate surveys that solicited teachers' views about their work environment. The district could begin to incorporate questions about how teachers assess the work of horizontal and vertical teams in terms of

improving their work with colleagues. Survey strategies would allow researchers to draw from a larger sample of schools and have greater potential to look at the effects of vertical teams over time on a chosen set of variables such as trust in the principal or understanding the school's strategy for instructional improvement.

The successful implementation of vertical team requires confronting some of the prevailing norms of hierarchy and autonomy in schools. This is often daunting work and sometimes lead schools to abandon the structure. Yet, if vertical teams do have the potential to support organizational learning, educators should continue to explore them. Schools are turning to teams at the grade level to support professional learning and vertical teams may appear to be the next logical step. My study revealed both the promise and perils of the early implementation of two vertical teams. Teachers' experiences demonstrated that dependable and capable leadership were crucial if vertical teams were to achieve their intended purpose. At these two schools, which educated large numbers of recent immigrants living in poverty, administrators and teachers needed no reminders about the importance of their work. Their dedication to their students made them willing to try anything that had the promise of helping their students succeed. Although their initial efforts at implementing vertical teams may have faltered, their experiences offer valuable insights to others who see vertical teams as a promising forum for organizational learning and whole school improvement.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A. Selected items related to teacher collaboration from the Monument

#### School District's Quality Indicators for Schools.

##### *Meetings*

The reviewer will meet with the principal, parents, teacher teams, and students (in a large and/or small group setting). During these meetings, the reviewer will listen for evidence that the various stakeholders embody the mission of the school.

##### *Meeting with Teachers*

The reviewer(s) will meet with two teacher teams. Where possible, one of the meetings should involve a team reviewing student work and related teacher work, though reviewer questions may focus on the connection between student work and data as well as resulting teacher actions and/or curricular modifications. The reviewer(s), in collaboration with the principal, will select the teacher teams that will engage in a dialogue around the impact of collaborative inquiry on pedagogical practice, sharing of evidence, and implications for student learning.

Teachers should be able to discuss how they use data to adjust instructional practices and strategies, plan for meeting student needs, and track student progress. Where possible, the reviewer(s) will observe the first teacher team meeting for part of the time allotted for the meeting, and then may pose questions to the team regarding what s/he observed and/or ask questions connected to other evidence requiring triangulation. Contingent upon the school's in-house calendar, the reviewer(s) will opt for one of the following choices in order to minimally disrupt student learning:

■\_In the case that teacher teams are typically meeting during the day of the review, the reviewer(s) will observe each teacher team engaged in a collaborative inquiry process, and ask questions as needed. Time can also be allotted towards the end of this meeting for questions and responses.

■\_In the case that teacher team meetings are not slated to occur as per the school's internal schedule, the reviewer(s) and principal can schedule a large group teacher meeting, or two smaller teacher group meetings, or one of each. The purpose will remain capturing evidence regarding the effectiveness of teacher teams engaged in collaborative inquiry at the school.

**Question:** *What is the focus of teacher team meetings?*

**Response:** One of the meetings should consist of an observation of a team involved in inquiry that addresses the connection between student work and data and resulting teacher actions including pedagogical or curricular modifications. The other team meeting will be an interview of teachers representing other key collaborations (content area, grade level, intervention, etc.). Questions asked in the interview will be focused on teacher teams' impact on teaching and learning.

#### **4.2 Engage in structured professional collaborations on teams using an inquiry approach that promotes shared leadership and focuses on improved student learning**

- a) The vast majority of teachers are engaged in inquiry-based, structured professional collaborations that have strengthened teacher instructional capacity and promoted the implementation of CCLS (including the instructional shifts), resulting in school-wide instructional coherence and increased student achievement for all learners
- b) Teacher teams systematically analyze key elements of teacher work including classroom practice, assessment data, and student work for students they share or on whom they are focused, resulting in shared improvements in teacher practice and mastery of goals for groups of students
- c) Distributed leadership structures are embedded so that there is effective teacher leadership and teachers play an integral role in key decisions that affect student learning across the school

#### **5.1 Evaluate the quality of school-level decisions, making adjustments as needed to increase the coherence of policies and practices across the school, with particular attention to the CCLS**

- a) School leaders and faculty have an effective and transparent process in place to purposefully evaluate and adjust curricular and instructional practices in response to student learning needs and the expectations of the CCLS, with a focus on building alignment and coherence between what is taught and how it is taught (*evaluation of practices of 1.1, 1.2, 2.2*)
- b) School leaders and faculty have a process in place to purposefully evaluate the quality of school culture and the ways expectations are developed and shared among school constituents, with a focus on making adjustments to support the expectations of the CCLS (*evaluation of practices of 1.4, 3.4*)
- c) School leaders and faculty have a process in place to purposefully evaluate and adjust the use of organizational resources and the quality of teacher team work and professional development practices, with particular attention to what teachers need to learn to support student mastery of the CCLS (*evaluation of practices of 1.3, 4.1, 4.2*)

## Appendix B: Interview Protocols

### Vertical Team Member (Teacher) protocol

#### **Background:**

- 1) How long have you been teaching? How long have you been teaching in this district?  
At this school?

#### **School overview:**

- 2) Please tell me a bit about your school—how it is organized, the students it serves, whether it has a particular focus—anything that seems important to you.

#### **Teaching assignment:**

- 3) What grade or subject do you teach?

#### **Overall view of school:**

- 4) If another teacher would ask you, “What’s it like to teach at \_\_\_\_\_?” How might you respond? What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a teacher here?

#### **Principal’s role:**

- 5) Please describe the role of the principal in your school. How does he/she use time? Visible to teachers and students? Instructional expertise? How does the principal help support or drive student achievement? How does the principal/admin support teachers?

#### **Student Achievement:**

- 6) What approaches do you and others in the school use to increase student learning and achievement?
  - Does the school monitor individual progress across grades? How formal is this process? Can you give me an example?
  - How is individual student progress monitored within classes and across school?
  - How often are students tested?

#### **The Vertical Team:**

- 7) I’ve observed you during your [Vertical] Team meeting.
  - How were you selected to participate on this team?
  - Can you describe what you typically do during one of these team meetings?
  - What are the goals and expectations for this team? How were those developed? Do you think these goals are important to improving the school?
  - How effective is this team at making progress towards those goals?
    - What has supported you in meeting those goals?

- What has been an obstacle that you have faced?
- Has work on this team influenced your own teaching practice? If so, in what ways? Can you give a specific example?
- Do you think the work on this team has influenced teaching or practices across the school? If so, in what ways? Can you give a specific example?
- Do you think the work on this team has influenced your principal? If so, in what ways? Can you give a specific example?
- What suggestions do you have for improving the work on this vertical team?

#### Non-vertical team member (teacher) protocol

##### **Background:**

- 1) How long have you been teaching? How long have you been teaching in this district? At this school?

##### **School overview:**

- 2) Please tell me a bit about your school—how it is organized, the students it serves, whether it has a particular focus—anything that seems important to you.

##### **Teaching assignment:**

- 3) What grade or subject do you teach?

##### **Overall view of school:**

- 4) If another teacher would ask you, “What’s it like to teach at \_\_\_\_\_?” How might you respond? What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a teacher here?

##### **Principal’s role:**

- 5) Please describe the role of the principal in your school. How does he/she use time? Visible to teachers and students? Instructional expertise? How does the principal help support or drive student achievement? How does the principal/admin support teachers?

##### **Student Achievement:**

- 6) What approaches do you and others in the school use to increase student learning and achievement?
  - Does the school monitor individual progress across grades? How formal is this process? Can you give me an example?
  - How is individual student progress monitored within classes and across school?
  - How often are students tested?

##### **The Vertical Team:**

- 7) Can you describe the purpose of the vertical team at your school?
- 8) How are teachers selected to be part of the vertical team?
  - Is that a role that might interest you in the future? Why or why not?
- 9) How do you learn about the work of the vertical team?

- Can you describe a decision or a request that has originated from the work of the vertical team?
  - Did you find that useful to your individual work with students?
- 10) Are there any issues in the school that you think the vertical team should begin to focus on more specifically?

#### Administrator Protocol

##### **Background:**

1. Please provide an overview of your school (size, programs, faculty size, students served).
2. How long have you been the principal? What other roles have you had as an educator?
3. What would you say are the strengths and weaknesses of your school?
4. What approaches do you and others in the school use to increase student learning and achievement?
5. How would you describe the experience profile of the teachers at your school? (New teachers, early career teachers, second-stage teachers, veteran teachers)

##### **The Vertical Team**

6. How were teachers selected to participate on this team?
7. What types of tasks or activities does this team engage in? What is your role on this team?
8. What are the goals and expectations for this team? How were those developed?
9. How effective is this team at making progress towards those goals?
10. What has supported them in meeting those goals?
11. What obstacles have they encountered?
12. How have you been able to support the work of that team?
13. Do you think the work of this team has had an effect on instruction in your building? If so, in what ways? Can you give a specific example?
14. Has the work on this team influenced what you think you need to do as a leader? If so, in what ways? Can you give specific examples?
15. What suggestions do you have for improving the work on the team?

## Appendix C: Observation protocol

<b>What do participants do?</b>	<b>What do participants say?</b>
<b>What do participants produce?</b>	<b>What do participants agree to?</b>

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## Appendix D: Site characteristics

### **Kingston Elementary:**

<850 students, grades PK - 5

61 percent free and reduced price lunch eligible

93 percent Asian, 3 percent Hispanic, 1 percent Black

33 percent English language learners, 10 percent students with disabilities

61 percent of students meet proficiency target in ELA (District average is 58 percent)

79 percent of students meet proficiency target in Math (District Average is 70 percent)

*Organizational Goal:* Increase the consistency of instruction across the school through the development of rubrics to set clear expectations for what students know and are able to do at each grade throughout their elementary school experience

### **Stonebridge Elementary:**

<950 students, grades K - 5

84 percent FRPL

54 percent Asian, 3 percent Black, 26 percent Hispanic, 15 percent White

49 percent ELL, 15 percent SWD

“Focus” School – not meeting target for student proficiency

18 percent of students meet proficiency target in ELA (District average is 30 percent)

25 percent of students meet proficiency target in Math (District Average is 58 percent)

*Organizational Goal:* increase communication around school-wide initiatives to improve curriculum, share resources across grade levels around instructional programs and strategies, increase capacity through sharing ideas from professional development across the schools.