



A Foundation of Trust: Building Bridges Across the District to Support School Leaders in Boston Public Schools

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**A Foundation of Trust:
Building Bridges Across the District
to Support School Leaders in Boston Public Schools**

Doctor of Education Leadership (Ed.L.D.) Capstone

Submitted by

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**To the Harvard Graduate School of Education
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Dedications

To my magnificent mother, the quintessential bucket-filler, **Sarah Elizabeth Jane McCall Jackson**, the vessel used by God to bring my life into this world. Without her, I would not exist, and, absent her influence, I cease to be the woman I am today. Each day without you widens the chasm in my heart incapable of restoration or repair; yet, I am reminded of the words found in Romans 8:28, which bring me a semblance of comfort and the assurance that you have sufficiently filled the most important bucket by pouring your all into me and Tamara. Thank you is incomplete and inadequate—I am grateful to have experienced your love for 40 years.

In your honor, I vow to ...

... forever embody your boldness—Denzel Washington can attest to this fact.

... always give more than I take; leave each space I occupy better than I found it.


... live each day of my life to mirror the values you instilled in me from birth.

Mommy, I felt your presence on my Ed.L.D. interview day because the first person I met was my “Ed.L.D. **angel**” peer coach, pod mate, J-Term travel buddy and fellow proctor, **Sarah** Rogers Tucker, who has been by my side through each moment of this unforgettable journey. Words cannot express my appreciation and gratitude for you SZLRT!

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- ★ **Grandma (Rathenia McCollum) Jackson**, your insistence on your granddaughters not using double negatives or accepting being perceived as a double negative earned me, a bold Black girl from Brooklyn, a place and space at Harvard. I don’t have “no” regrets about one moment of my experience during these last three years.
- ★ **Grandma Sue (SueNeal McAllister McCall Williams)**, your declaration and reminder for when traveling on the road of life—always get off on “Exit Excellence.” Your words are a reminder to always live a life of integrity and distinction. I honor you, Uncle Andrew, Carl and Earchie by living a life that would astound my ancestors’ wildest dreams.

To **every child** I have ever taught, mentored, chastised or encountered along my journey, I thank you for allowing me to be a safe space, gentle guide **and** warm demander. Outkast released “(I’m Sorry) Ms. Jackson” on October 17, 2000. Lord knows, if I had a dollar for every time a child sang that song to me, I’d be a wealthy woman. And yet the wealth I have accumulated and lessons I’ve learned, since teaching my first lesson at the Hampton University Lab School in 1992 at the age of 17, is indescribable. While I did not entertain many excuses prior to leaving my role as a classroom teacher in 2001, as a result of life life-ing and this unforgettable, transformative experience in the Ed.L.D. program, my heart has been unfettered to allow for a multitude of grace and space in which everyone is encouraged to grow.

 **May the work I’ve done speak for me.**
May the life I’ve lived speak for me.
May the service I give speak for me.

May the Lord give us both the honesty and strength to look our own faults squarely in the face
and not ever grow to excuse and minimize them, while they grow.

Grant us that wide view of ourselves which our neighbors possess,
or better the highest view of infinite justice and goodness and efficiency.

In that great white light let us see the littleness and narrowness of our souls and deeds of our days,
and then forthwith begin their betterment.

Only thus shall we broaden out the vicious circle of our own admiration
into the greater commendation of God. Amen.

Psalm 80

—W.E.B. DuBois

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Kintsukuroi is a kind of Japanese ceramic style. The word *Kintsukuroi* means “to repair with gold.” When a ceramic piece breaks, an artisan will fuse the pieces back together using liquid gold or gold-dusted lacquer. Rather than being covered up, the breaks become more obvious, and a new piece of art emerges from the brokenness. Each crack represents a piece of history, and becomes more beautiful because it has been broken. Embracing flaws and imperfection, while highlighting the *art* of resilience, *kintsukuroi* reminds us that eventually, though you will be different than before, you will again become whole. (Adapted from Cyndie Spiegel)

Over the course of these three years in the Ed.L.D. program, I fell many times.
I literally broke into pieces.

And I am standing shiny and tall by virtue of the craftsmanship of many gold-dusted souls.

With an abundance of gratitude to my gold-dusted souls ...

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Abstract

As home to the oldest elementary and high schools in the United States, Boston has always been one step ahead of the rest of the country in education policy. Amid the calamity, strife and uncertainty of 2020, Boston Public Schools has striven to maintain the trailblazing pace set four centuries ago. Caught in the middle of the chaos are the 54,000 school-aged children in Boston and the adults responsible for their care—parents, teachers, school leaders and educational staff around the world, especially adults responsible for decision-making about their ongoing learning.

Currently, however, there is a fundamental disconnect between the activities of the central office and the support needed by school leaders. This disconnect has to do specifically with what support school leaders need to create the right conditions for teachers to provide high-quality equitable instruction for all students. For BPS to advance equity and transform academic outcomes for each student, the district needs to create the conditions that will position school leaders and the central office to achieve the goal by working together.

Successful relationships between school-based and district office leaders allow for colleagues to interact, learn together, and build trust—all critical components in education systems pursuing change (Finnigan 2017). In an attempt to bridge the gap between district office and school-based leaders, I conducted a pilot by pairing school leaders with a district partner to collaborate on the implementation of PLCs (Professional Learning Communities) for all school leaders district-wide. In order to determine the appropriate level of support for these pairings, I conducted more than 50 interviews with staff and leaders within Boston Public Schools and leveraged data obtained through the PDSA (Plan-Do-Study-Act) framework to focus on PLC leaders' acute needs and adapt the structures of support accordingly.

In my analysis, I reflected on the three drivers of Frances Frei's Trust Triangle—authenticity, empathy and logic. This capstone acknowledges the current state of affairs and offers concrete recommendations for Boston Public Schools to (a) build a foundation of trust to increase effective communication between school leaders and district office leaders; (b) provide support for school leaders to increase their capacity as instructional leaders; and (c) ensure leadership carries out three core responsibilities: providing direction, protection and order for school leaders, all of which are critical in times of crisis.

Introduction

"Leaders are not the ones in charge. Leaders are the ones with the courage to go first."
Simon Sinek

Leadership Matters. Boston Public School Leaders have noted a fundamental disconnect between the activities of the central office and the support they need to do their best work for students. Since no single system can do everything, systems ought to specify what they are able to achieve with existing resources and communicate goals to all stakeholders within and outside of the system. A high-functioning *educational* system embraces and leverages the discrepancy between its current capacity and its desired state and continuously seeks opportunities to reach its desired state.

During a recent visit to Morocco, Pope Francis (O'Connell,2019) asserted "we saw that we need bridges and we feel pain when we see persons that prefer to build walls ... those who build bridges go forward. The bridge is for human communication - walls are against communication; they are for isolation, and those who build them will become prisoners." Boston Public Schools can identify opportunities to raze the existing walls, break down the silos and build bridges across the gaping chasm that exists between district office and school based leaders. Successful school based and district office leader relationships allow for colleagues to interact, learn together, and build trust - all critical components in education systems oriented toward change. (Finnigan 2017)

By building bridges, school-based and central office staff and leadership will discover their daily responsibilities to be complementary; reciprocity will, in turn, influence the success of all Boston Public Schools scholars. In its present state, the central office is struggling to manage a profusion of crises. School leaders are experiencing the lack of coherent problem-solving, which becomes an impediment to school leaders' growth and development into strong anti-racist instructional leaders.

School leaders speak of a lack of time to focus on important issues because so many administrative tasks must be done. Often, they feel that the leadership aspect of the job is shortchanged (Leadership Matters, p.6). A senior district leader agreed and shared, “We [*central office*] need to do adaptive leadership better, by providing direction, protection and order for our school leaders.”

In this capstone, I will examine the following questions to frame my problem of practice, as I seek to create a strategy for cultivating a culture of leadership and support across the district:

- 1) What role does trust play in establishing a culture of leadership and support across the district?
- 2) How can district office leaders create the conditions for a coherent system of support for school leaders?
- 3) What does high-quality professional learning look like for education leaders?

This Capstone will examine the role of the central office in providing school leaders with the conditions needed to positively develop teachers and influence student performance. By identifying barriers and sharing research-based practices, this capstone will support BPS in building effective partnerships between central office and school-based leaders.

Transformation of Central/District Offices. In *Supervising Principals for Instructional Leadership*, Honig and Rainey state that ensuring excellent teaching and learning requires removal of systemic barriers (p.15). According to a Wallace Foundation study, additional findings further reveal that district office transformation moves beyond old debates in education about whether schools or the district office should be driving reform. They now show that improving teaching and learning district-wide is a systems problem – a challenge that requires the

participation of both district office and schools to realize such outcomes.¹ In order to ensure the district is able to cultivate system coherence, development of common language and clear goals, it must foster meaningful relationships between district office leaders and school leaders. Coherence begins when leaders operate primarily as lead learners with a clear focus.

“Too much change is not a good thing. Ask the climate.”

Michael Scott “The Office” (‘Saber’, S06E14)

Nothing Changes if Nothing Changes. On April 23, 1635, the first public school in what would become the United States was established in Boston, Massachusetts. Based on the model of The Free Grammar School in London, The Boston Latin School was founded as a college preparatory school for male students. It took 337 years for the nation’s first school to admit women, in 1972. Over the last 385 years, schools in Boston have undergone significant change, yet throughout this system and across our nation race and achievement disparities persist. Based on academic performance on statewide assessments, in the 2018–19 school year, the number of Black and Latinx students from grades 3–8 who met/exceeded expectations in English/Language Arts was 34% lower than Asian and White students. In the 2018–19 school year, , the number of Black and Latinx students from grades 3–8 who met/exceeded expectations in Math was 49% lower than Asian students. Similarly, in Table 1.1, I found that graduation rates across a 10-year span shows an increase **across** racial lines, yet the decade did not close the gap **between** the racial lines. (I used 2019 data to allow for any social promotion which may have taken place at the close of the 2020 pandemic school year.) To eradicate these inequities, school leaders must ensure there is a laser-focus on providing high-quality instruction in every classroom within BPS.

¹ "Central Office Transformation for District-wide Teaching and"
https://www.k-12leadership.org/sites/default/files/ctp_cotdtli.pdf. Accessed 14 Nov. 2020.

Table 1.1

BPS Graduation Rates²

	Asian	Black	Latinx	White
2010	81.6%	60.6%	56.8%	74.4%
2019	91.5%	71.9%	67.0%	81.9%
2020	91.9%	*74.6%	*69.8%	83.9%

An 18-year-old Boston Public Schools student who entered the public school system in 2006 for pre-K and graduated from high school in May 2020 will have experienced the organizational leadership of six superintendents within the span of their 14-year BPS educational tenure.

Michael Contompasis	2006–2007 (Interim)
Carol R. Johnson	2007–2012
John P. McDonough	2012–2015 (Interim)
Tommy Chang	2015–2018
Laura Perille	2018–2019 (Interim)
Brenda Cassellius	2019–Present

With each shift in leadership, the structural relationship between district office and school-based leaders is upended, thereby causing the new leader to start from scratch. The current superintendent, Dr. Brenda Cassellius, arrived with a set of core values: J.U.I.C.E., which stands for *Joy. Unity.* Inclusion. Collaboration. Equity.* (At the behest of a BPS school leader, Dr. Cassellius added *Unity* and coined the term “The J.U.I.C.E.”) After a year of surveying the district landscape and formulating a plan of action, the eagerly anticipated J.U.I.C.E. rollout quickly soured with the arrival of the twin pandemics, COVID-19 and COVID-1619. The latter term, coined in June 2020 by Rev. Otis Moss III and Rev. Raphael Warnock, underscores the pandemic of racism which has plagued the country since the first *enslaved* Black people from

² <https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/Page/694>
https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/grad/grad_report.aspx?orgcode=00350000&orgtypecode=5&fycode=2020

Africa arrived on the Virginia shores in 1619. Against this backdrop, district leadership attempted to shift to meet the emerging needs of students, teachers, school leaders and families. While Boston Public Schools is touted as one of the highest-performing urban public school systems in the country, specific subgroups of students are underperforming on academic measures, and there is high turnover in school leadership. (In the past five years, the school leader turnover has fluctuated between 15–20%.) The primary reason cited by school leaders who chose to leave the district was “lack of trust in central office.” Quoted in the DESE report on Boston Public Schools, Massachusetts State Education Commissioner Jeffrey Riley stated, “Teachers and administrators report little to no confidence in a central office that experiences constant turnover.” As a result of constant turnover, there is a lack of trust between school leaders and the district office.

Leveraging Leadership. School leaders are an important lever for creating the conditions to change academic outcomes for students. Their effectiveness is bolstered when they trust that the central office is working on their behalf. Ensuring school leaders are well connected and supported may be district office leaders’ key role (Finnigan, p.28). The Office of Achievement Gaps within Boston Public Schools was created as a result of a 2016 equity policy adopted by the School Committee, the governing body of the district, which aimed to eliminate opportunity and achievement gaps for students of color, English Language Learners, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities. Devised in collaboration with the Office of Leadership Development, the vision of the Executive Cabinet, which consists of the seven district Division Chiefs, is to effectively align all professional development offered by the District to focus on equity and to increase the district’s capacity to support school leaders in eliminating opportunity and achievement gaps.

School leaders must be supported for teachers to fulfill the BPS mission: to give every child in every classroom an equitable, world-class, high-quality education. In owning up to its failure to achieve this mission, in 2016 BPS decided to participate in the Public Education

Leadership Project (PELP). At this time, they crafted the following problem of practice: “BPS does not consistently provide authentic learning opportunities for our students who are most marginalized to develop into self-determined, independent learners, able to pursue their aspirations. Our failures lead to disengaged students and significant opportunity gaps. Since its creation, The OAG (now known as OG) has since proposed leveraging district based staff to focus on instructional support and accountability; which is one way to ensure school-based staff/leadership receive high-quality instructional support.”

Outlined in the OAG Policy and the Strategic Plan are the following goals, which are intended to support the district in expeditiously taking actions that mitigate the statistics noted above.³

OAG POLICY ALIGNMENT

GOAL 1: DISTRICT-WIDE IMPLEMENTATION AND OVERSIGHT

To create a District where every person in every department is responsible and accountable for the education of all students at every school, and devoted to eliminating the opportunity and achievement gaps facing students of color, English Language Learners, students with disabilities, and students of low socioeconomic status. This Policy shall be governed by a set of nine Provisions outlined herein.

Services and staff delivering these must have cultural competency, a racial equity lens, and the capacity to implement Culturally and Linguistically Sustaining Practices.

STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT

GOAL 2: ACCELERATE LEARNING

- 2.8 Implement a comprehensive district-wide professional development plan for paras, teachers, counselors, and school and central leaders to develop capacity and expertise to change student outcomes as outlined in this plan.

GOAL 5: CULTIVATE TRUST

- 5.2 Restructure central office for effectiveness and accountability in ways that provide appropriate engagement, support and accountability for school communities, with child and family friendly services.

In times of crisis, and afterwards, leaders should avoid decisions that impede aid and progress. Recently, we have seen how leadership decisions directly impact millions of lives and have contributed to the death of more than 500,000 Americans. Leaders create the conditions for change to occur. Together, district leadership and school-based leaders can remove the impediments to student progress by providing direct support to address areas of need. How are

³ "Opportunity and Achievements Gaps Task Force / Opportunity and"
<https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/domain/1898>. Accessed 21 Jan. 2021.

the decisions of the district office supporting or impeding school leaders in becoming effective instructional leaders, with a particular focus on racial equity?

“Our education system is allergic to change and comfortable with oppression, so if the system is not physically and theoretically pushed to stay in the direction of progress, it will revert back to its obsolete purpose.”

—**Bettina Love**

Review of Knowledge for Action

“There is only one way to achieve greater coherence, and that is through purposeful action and interaction, working on capacity, clarity, precision of practice, transparency, monitoring of progress, and continuous correction. All of this requires the right mixture of ‘pressure and support’; the press for progress within supportive and focused cultures” (Fullan, 2016, p.2).

“Everything rises and falls on leadership. Everything.”

John Maxwell

“Change moves at the speed of trust.”

Stephen Covey

When considering the relevant bodies of knowledge to review for my strategic project, I considered both the short- (a/b) and long-term (c) tasks assigned to me through the Division of Accountability: (a) ascertain the current mechanisms of support for school leaders; (b) cultivate opportunities for district- and school-based leaders to partner by adapting to existing school-leader–led Professional Learning Communities; and (c) design an implementation strategy for district-wide expectations for professional learning. These tasks necessitate a solid foundation of trust, which led me to explore two approaches to building and maintaining personal and organizational trust.

Effective Leadership

“... leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an *influence* on student learning. To date we have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership” (Wahlstrom 2010, p.9). Excerpted from a six-year

research study (2010), these words underscore the mandate that districts cultivate, support and empower school leaders to become strong instructional leaders with an uncompromising sense of self-efficacy. Principal efficacy establishes a crucial link between district initiatives, school conditions, and student learning. Principals are most effective when they see themselves as working **with** district personnel, teachers and other school leaders towards clear, common goals (2010). Education research shows that most school variables, considered separately, have, at most, small effects on learning. The real payoff comes when individual variables combine to reach critical mass. Creating the right conditions for that to happen is the school leader's job (Wallace Foundation, 2011, p. 2). Implementation of that process across the district requires a coherent strategy, one that involves multiple stakeholders and has a clear timeline for execution. It cannot be overstated: execution of a new strategy can take anywhere from 2–5+ years. Throughout this capstone, I reflect on the need for a comprehensive long-term strategy that will build a bridge between school-based leaders and the central office, while creating the conditions for trusting relationships. If the strategy is executed and aligned with the research, the conditions *should* produce an environment with positive effects on academic achievement and the district's overall culture.

In defining leadership, Frei submits that “leadership is about empowering other people as a result of your presence—and making sure that impact continues into your absence” (p. 5). *I interpret this to mean that moments count.* On average, a principal accounts for 25 percent of a school's total impact on student achievement—an outsize impact for a single individual. Indeed, the difference between an average and an above-average principal can impact student achievement by as much as 20 percentage points. Although principals *may* impact student achievement directly, they typically have a more indirect impact by influencing school practices and culture. Research has shown that the primary way principals impact student achievement is by improving teacher effectiveness. A 2009 study by New Leaders stresses that “Principals cannot lead schools to make dramatic achievement gains on their own: the support of an

instructional leadership team is crucial” (p.22). Not only are instructional leadership teams an important factor in establishing high-performing schools—the study also highlights “a depth of implementation in three additional areas that set them apart from their peers: building school-wide consistency of instructional strategies, using diverse student-level and school-wide data to drive instructional improvement, and creating the conditions for teachers to learn, plan, analyze, and adapt together” through **professional learning communities** (p. 24).

When it comes to improving practice, school leaders have reported that the strongest learning comes from those closest to the work (p. 25). By creating professional learning communities, teachers and leaders can strengthen their practice. Senge recommends that they “continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (p. 3).

What role does trust play in establishing a culture of leadership and support across the district?

The Role of the District—Trust and Training

BPS believes that all students deserve a caring, competent, and professional educator who will help them reach their full potential. According to the fifth pillar of the The BPS Strategic Plan, which indicates a desire to “Cultivate Trust,”

We will invest in the development of staff to create a culture of culturally proficient and welcoming service for our students, families, and community. Building trust requires patience and planning with a considerable focus on constructive resolution of inevitable differences. Superintendents/principal supervisors/school leaders get their work done through other people. (BPS Strategic Plan, 2020–2025)

Philosopher Annette Baier (1991) observes that trust is like air—we only notice it when it becomes scarce or polluted. In deciding between building relationships and getting results,

Lanfer has this to say: “When boundaries are significant, it takes *disruption* to get to authentic relationships and it takes authentic relationships to build trust. Only when they have real trust can people bridge across differences” (2012). In the midst of a global pandemic, there was an immediate desire to trust and to *be* trusted.

As a principal, I have found that mutual trust is built one interaction at a time. It is not something that is established with an introduction, yet it can be strengthened through authentic and consistent positive experiences. I view trust through the lens of equity—everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. Hence, I believe that all persons are worthy of my trust, as fellow human beings. According to Bryk, “trust constitutes a calculation whereby an individual decides whether or not to engage in an action with another individual that incorporates some degree of risk” (Bryk p.14). Although he is writing in the context of schools, the concept of relational trust can be applied to the district setting. Relational trust, in this context, requires that expectations held among members of a social network or organization be regularly validated by actions (Bryk, p. 21). When a district espouses its mission, vision and values, the community it serves will judge its actions based on the written words. Meanwhile, relational trust diminishes when individuals perceive that others are not behaving in ways that can be understood as consistent with their expectations about the other’s role obligations. (Bryk p.21)

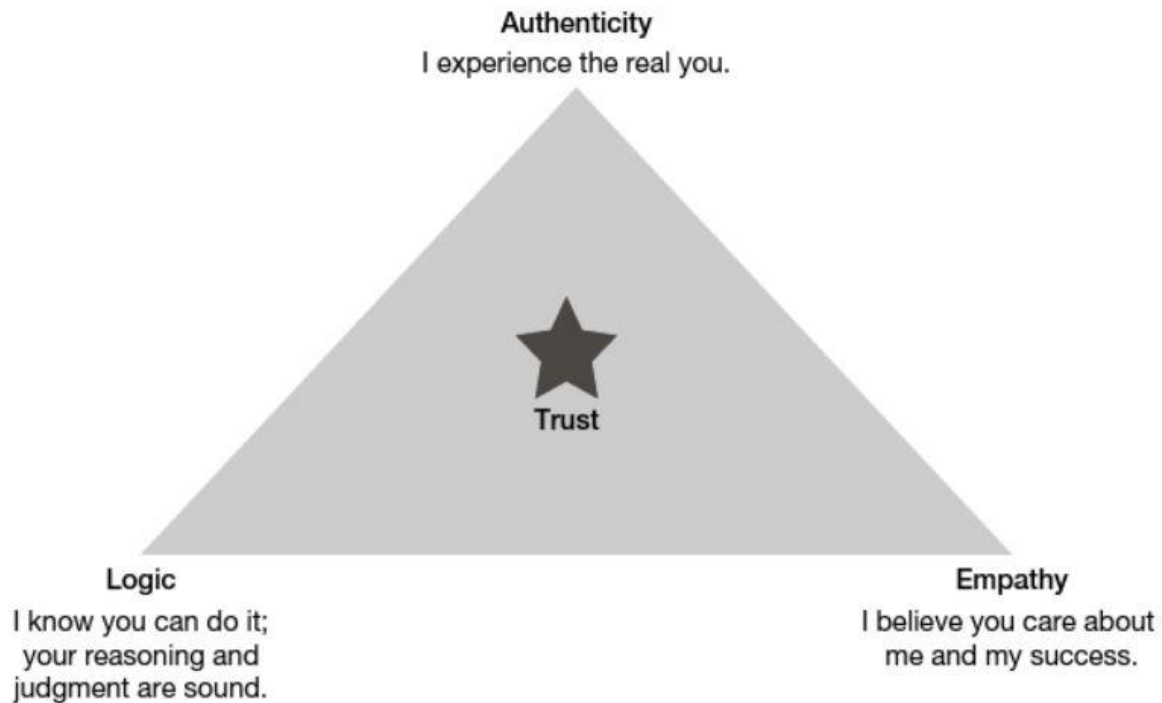
Throughout the pandemic there have been many opportunities for trust-building between district and school leaders, yet an obstacle or barrier always seemed to get in the way

Pattern of Trust. We are inevitably doing one of two things through our behaviors: building trust or eroding it. When trust is broken, the same driver tends to go “wobbly” on us. Frei terms the pattern of setbacks trust “wobble” (p. 35). People tend to trust you when they believe they are interacting with the real you (***authenticity***), when they have faith in your judgment and competence (***logic***), and when they feel that you care about them (***empathy***). When trust is lost, it can almost always be traced back to a breakdown in one of these three

drivers. To build trust as a leader, you first need to figure out which driver you “wobble” on (Frei Morriss, 2020).

Figure 2.1

The Trust Triangle - Unleashed



How can district office leaders create the conditions for a coherent system of support for school leaders?

System of Support

In BPS, the approach to leadership challenges has come from the central office, where solutions are addressed from the top down. Conversely, in other districts, central office leadership turns all of the problems over to the school leader, without providing direction or support—just a demand for results. Individually, both approaches are ineffective. Meredith Honig and Lynda Rainey suggest districts encourage principals supervisors to use a teaching and

learning approach, which lead to school leaders spending more time handling progressively challenging instructional leadership work over time (Honig, M; Rainey, L. 2012, p. 31).

In order to grasp the current reality, it is important to understand the origins of the central office (used interchangeably throughout the capstone with “district office”) in public education systems. In an interview with Phi Delta Kappan, Meredith Honig speaks about the history of central/district offices, “School districts were created at the turn of the last century, though for different reasons in big cities than in small towns. Urban school districts focused mainly on operational issues such as managing enrollments and purchasing supplies. District central offices have always been well positioned to play a capacity-building role, given their proximity to and knowledge of local schools” (Heller, p. 42-3). Historically, district offices provided technical solutions and eventually grew to meet a variety of needs in schools. Within BPS, school leaders benefit from the proximate support of supervisors and regional school superintendents, who primarily support school leaders in strengthening their instructional lens. Additionally, Operational Leaders exist to buffer school leaders from technical tasks which do not directly impact academic achievement. Presently the district office lacks a coherent model, one which will ensure that all schools have the necessary tangible resources to meet the needs of leaders who influence student outcomes. A high-functioning district office can protect school leaders’ time from duties and tasks not directly related to academic achievement - and provide the support needed to influence an increase in academic outcomes.

In *Supervising Principals for Instructional Leadership*, Honig and Rainey state that ensuring excellent teaching and learning necessitates the removal of systemic barriers (p.15). According to a Wallace Foundation study, additional findings reveal that central office transformation moves beyond old debates in education about whether schools or the central office should be driving reform. Improving teaching and learning district-wide is a systems problem—a challenge that requires the participation of both central office and schools to realize

good outcomes.⁴ For the district to cultivate system coherence, common language and clear goals, it must foster meaningful relationships between central office leaders and school leaders. Coherence begins when leaders operate primarily as lead learners with a clear focus.

There is an urgent need to build a bridge between the daily functions of school-based leadership, central office staff and leadership through professional learning experiences and to increase trust on all levels. According to research from U. Washington, four approaches to professional learning have been found to have a significant impact on student outcomes (Honig, 2015):

1. ***Align central office resources, data, and other systems to meet the demands of school leaders. Eliminate competition and lack of coordination within central office units that impede their support for the improvement of teaching and learning.***
2. Overcoming the limitations of available data for targeting resources for improvement.
3. Create systems for the hiring and placement of personnel in ways that support improved teaching and learning.
4. ***Ensure that central office staff who supervise school leaders provide school leaders with the kinds of intensive support that can help them lead for instructional improvement.***

With roots in the first and fourth approach, my residency intersects with the Division of Accountability, School Superintendents and the Office of Leadership Development. In collaboration with central office staff and leadership and external partners, we have developed a coherent district-wide strategy to provide support in the form of competency-based professional learning experiences, and thereby ensure that all school-based leaders exemplify visionary leadership that is culturally, instructionally and operationally competent - and collaborative with district office staff and external partners. According to a 2014 New Leaders' study, the researchers found:

“... many districts implementing changes may require a deep cultural shift to create a climate of shared ownership, trust, and mutual accountability in which central office and school-level leaders see one another as partners in improving academic achievement and meeting students' needs. Initiating this project is exciting and challenging primarily because effective professional

⁴ "Central Office Transformation for District-wide Teaching and"
https://www.k-12leadership.org/sites/default/files/ctp_cotdtli.pdf. Accessed 14 Nov. 2020.

learning involves leaders both as learners and leaders, and allows them to struggle with the uncertainties that accompany each role.”

Districts are responsible for creating the conditions for leaders to be effective. Doing so requires a clear strategy—a set of guiding principles that will generate the desired pattern of decision making. Even the best leaders cannot achieve their potential in systems that do not support them—or, even worse, act as barriers to their success (Ikemoto, 2014). District leaders can take concrete steps to foster this culture and inculcate it into their districts through structures, norms, policies, and practices. Districts should also put in place tangible supports, resources, and policies to support principals and other school leaders in their work (Ikemoto, 2014). When these conditions are in place, school leaders are expected to focus on their most critical work as instructional leaders: creating a strong school culture, developing teacher talent, and driving instructional improvement. Instead of managing innumerable mundane tasks, school leaders can turn their attention to supporting instruction and enabling teachers to do what needs to be done to generate dramatically better student-learning outcomes. With the right resources and support to make the job sustainable, they can produce these results year in and year out, not just for a limited period of time. Ultimately, when school leaders are given the conditions that allow them to carry out this work, the schools they lead can transform children’s lives. (Ikemoto, 2014)

One district where this is taking place is Gwinnett County, Georgia. The philosophy of the twenty-four-year-tenured Superintendent J. Alvin Wilbanks is quite simple. It is captured in the Human Resources Personnel Handbook for all employees.

Our core business is teaching and learning, and we believe ... in providing a quality education for the students of our community. Whether you are a teacher or someone who supports teaching and learning ... we believe you have the knowledge and skills that will assist our school system in fulfilling its vision of becoming a system of world-class schools.

With this philosophy in mind, the BPS Chief Accountability Officer, Corey E. Harris shares weekly correspondence with district office and school leaders to reinforce Superintendent Wilbanks's ethos. An example from the memo shared on October 22nd:

The heart of a transformation effort involves creating direct, personal relationships between individual district office staff and school leaders specifically focused on helping every school leader become a stronger instructional leader. District office staff must interact with schools in various other ways, including direct work with teachers. A striking feature of district office transformation efforts is a focus on building the capacity of school leaders to lead for instructional improvement within their schools. Support and attention to school leaders' instructional leadership marks a promising shift in the role of the school leader from mainly school building and staff manager to leadership for learning improvement.

Leading Change

Kotter first highlighted failures in his transformation efforts in a 1995 *Harvard Business Review* article, "Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail." Shortly thereafter, he reoriented his focus to identify the eight best practices for leading change and effecting successful transformation—each step being the reverse of one of the previously established errors (Figure 2.2). This approach to transformational change allows the organization or individual to frame their steps as positive action items, as opposed to pitfalls to avoid. In defining transformation, Kotter included the adoption of new technologies, major strategic shifts, restructuring units and departments, and cultural change. In so doing, he solicits support from all areas of the organization to collectively and systemically change the current systems.

Figure 2.2

Kotter's Eight Step Change Management Model/ Process for Leading Change - *Hughes (2016)*

Eight errors which cause transformation failures (Kotter, 1995)	Eight steps to transform your organization (Kotter, 1996)
Error 1: Not establishing a great enough sense of urgency	1. Establishing a sense of urgency
Error 2: Not creating a powerful enough guiding coalition	2. Forming a powerful guiding coalition
Error 3: Lacking a vision	3. Creating a vision
Error 4: Under communicating the vision by a factor of 10	4. Communicating the vision
Error 5: Not removing obstacles to the new vision	5. Empowering others to act on the vision
Error 6: Not systematically planning for, and creating short-term wins	6. Planning for and creating short term wins
Error 7: Declaring victory too soon	7. Consolidating improvements and producing still more change
Error 8: Not anchoring changes in the corporation's culture	8. Institutionalizing new approaches

Continuous Improvement

There is a gap between what we know to be effective and what school leaders and principal supervisors do in practice. Implementation science, the multi-disciplinary study of methods and strategies to promote use of research findings in practice, addresses this gap through frameworks that guide creation of conditions and activities that facilitate use of evidence-based practices (Eccles & Mittman, 2006).

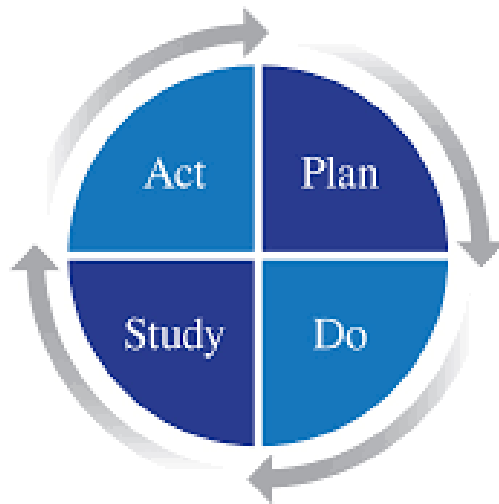
With an iterative cycle of continuous improvement, an organization can implement a four-step plan of action to improve the quality of their system over time. (See Figure 2.3) The PDSA cycles consists of four phases:

1. **Plan** — identify barriers or challenges, using data whenever possible, and specify the plan to move programs or innovations forward as well as the outcomes that will be monitored. Plan a change or test aimed at improvement.
2. **Do** — carry out the strategies or plan as specified to address the challenges; Carry out the change or test (preferably on a small scale).
3. **Study** — use the measures identified during the planning phase to assess and track progress, and examine the results. What did we learn? What went wrong?

4. **Act** — make changes to the next iteration of the plan to improve implementation. Adopt the change, abandon it or run through cycle again

Figure 2.3

PDSA Framework



The PDSA method has its origins in the healthcare industry. Walter Shewhart and Edward Deming’s articulation of iterative processes eventually became known as the four stages of PDSA. I selected this particular framework because I recognize the fragility of overhauling an effort that has worked well in the past; based on survey data collected, BPS school leaders found the structures and content shared in the PLCs to be beneficial to their practice. The PDSA process is intended for iterative learning and improvement of a product or process (Reed, 2016). In this case, the framework is helpful in tweaking the process of PLCs within the district. Also, the framework is helpful even when there is an ineffective change based on barriers and poor choices, since the cycle can be repeated until the desired results are achieved. However, it is hard to execute PDSA well. Compared to other approaches, PDSA may not be as rigorous due to its tendency to oversimplify complex problems. I selected this framework anyway to offer a slight variation on a process that yielded “good results” in previous

years. PDSA also allows participants to contribute their ideas to the design process and incorporates a space for reflection into the iteration.

The four stages mirror the scientific method: formulating a hypothesis, collecting data to test this hypothesis, analysing and interpreting the results, and making inferences to iterate the hypothesis. Changes to the system are easily identified by feedback gained through rapid assessment. This framework will be beneficial to the work of professional learning communities in BPS, which have been in existence for three years, yet have not trickled down to shift the teaching and learning practices of all schools.

Cultivating Coherence

Fullan defines coherence operating successfully through clarity, purposeful action, capacity-building, precision of practice, monitoring of progress and continuous correction (Fullan, 2016). Coherence involves “a combination of a small number of ambitious goals being relentlessly pursued, being vigilant about reducing distractors, helping with professional capacity building, using student and other data transparently for developmental purposes, building in strategies for implementers to learn from each other on an ongoing basis, and marking progress with lots of feedback and supportive intervention” (Fullan and Quinn, 2016). In working towards creating a coherent system, BPS must consider the alignment between their strategy and other features of the school system. Three areas of focus for achieving coherence are stakeholders, culture, and external environment.

In order to improve the system, individuals must shift their practice. Establishing a culture of coherence asks practitioners to consider what the main pieces of the organization are and how they relate to each other (e.g. vision, goals, strategies, finances, accountability, training). Coherence is not so much about controlling the actions of staff as it is about presenting opportunities to collectively and creatively solve the most daunting challenges facing

school systems. Thus, Fullan defines coherence as the shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of the work (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 1).

Measuring the Impact of Professional Learning and Professional Learning Communities

What does high-quality professional learning look like for education leaders?

Any ongoing support for continued school leader learning should model the type of community that the school leaders want to build in their own schools. In this case, school leaders not only had conversations about complex leadership tasks such as professional community building—they also built a professional community in which they were asked to reflect about their group learning, collaboratively consider a leadership problem, deprivatize their practice, give and receive useful feedback, and reframe important leadership dilemmas. This is exactly the community they should build in their schools. Without a systemic approach, organizational factors can stymie improvement efforts, even when the individual aspects of professional development are done right (Guskey 2009).

Guskey proposes approaches to altering professional development. For instance, ask why it is important to view the process not just in terms of *individual* improvement, but also in terms of improvements in the capacity of the *organization* to solve problems and renew itself. (Both must be addressed simultaneously and support one another, or the strides made in one area may be offset by continuing problems in the other.)

Effective leaders build both competence and confidence through professional learning experiences, by developing knowledge and skills, and by building confidence through cultivation of a safe, non-threatening, collaborative culture with adequate support. Guskey defines professional development as a systematic effort and a continuous process of educator development. The goal is to inform and shift the practices of educators on all levels and, by extension, impact student outcomes. In this case, “student outcomes” refers to both academic

and non-academic measures that affect student learning. According to Guskey, the belief that professional development *causes* a shift in beliefs is faulty. (Guskey, 2002)

According to the Department of Education, (2010), Massachusetts defines High Quality Professional Development (HQPD) as “A set of coherent learning experiences that is systematic, purposeful, and structured over a sustained period of time with the goal of improving teacher practice and student outcomes.” It enables educators to facilitate the learning of students by acquiring and applying knowledge, skills, and abilities that address student needs and district, school and individual improvement goals. HQPD conforms to best practices in research in that it relates to educators' assignments and professional responsibilities.

Partnership and Professional Learning

Schools are only as effective as the educators leading and teaching within its halls. Professional development is critical to professional progress and growth, yet the means by which it is measured is highly debatable. While my strategic project is ambitious in its attempt to impact student achievement, it is an indirect attempt to affect students outcomes in the long-term. Districts should employ only thoughtfully planned and well-implemented professional development activities to enhance educator’s knowledge and skills. Sustained and methodologically rigorous studies of professional development can be costly, rendering clear and unequivocal results elusive.

The fundamental work of school leaders is leading the learning of schools, adults, and students (Fahey 2011). The most meaningful learning happens when leaders are part of a professional community that is reflective, collaborative, and consistently focused on the subject matter of teaching and learning. A sense of autonomy and ownership is formed when leaders create the conditions that support powerful professional learning communities. A significant body of literature connects the existence of a professional learning community to gains in student learning (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

A professional learning community (PLC) is one way to engage in sustained professional conversations focused on equity-based teaching practices. In order for a PLC to be effective, educators need to focus on the following three principles: (1) focus on learning: every professional considers what they want their students to learn, how they will be able to tell when students are learning, and how they will respond when a student has difficulties; (2) culture of collaboration: every professional understands the power of systematic collaboration to analyze and improve practice; and (3) focus on results: every professional strives towards "identifying the current level of student achievement, establishing a goal to improve the current level, working together to achieve that goal, and providing periodic evidence of progress" (DuFour, 2004, p. 5).

Partnering the district office with school leaders through targeted and meaningful professional learning experiences is one means of bridging the two. However, the professional learning experience must be a purposeful endeavor (Guskey 2002). Leaders of professional learning experiences are asked to use five evaluation levels to determine the effectiveness of sessions. Additionally, the research is clear that professional learning alone does not change outcomes for students. There are many other factors to be considered; professional learning is no magic wand for *fixing* the educational system. InPraxis developed a report, "Effective Professional Development: What the Research Says," for Alberta Education in Canada. When creating professional learning experiences, the authors emphasize, districts must use research that links school effectiveness, professional development and student achievement and growth. We must ensure that it is sustainable and connected to meaningful, locally based contexts; reiterating the strong connection between school improvement initiatives, research-based inquiries such as collaborative and action research, and professional development programs. (2006).

Focusing on strengths at both the school and district level are critical to the implementation of high-quality professional learning experiences which are supplemented by a

partnership of ongoing support for school leaders. This capstone addresses three central questions:

1. What role does trust play in establishing a culture of leadership and support across the district?
2. How can district office leaders create the conditions for a coherent system of support for school leaders?
3. What does high-quality professional learning look like for education leaders?

Theory of Action

“You don’t become what you want. You become what you believe.”

Oprah Winfrey

In order to develop a cogent theory of action, which allows for planning, action and planning for future action, I relied upon the aforementioned research of ... Additionally, I surveyed the political landscape of BPS, specifically the insular Boston culture, and relied heavily upon the deep institutional knowledge of colleagues. As I continued to dissect the present conditions relevant to support for professional learning and the implementation of effective practices toward coherence-making; I discovered that coherence is not *created*, although opportunities for coherence *can be* cultivated. These early reflections led me to construct the following theory of action:

If I,

- examine the current internal and external mechanisms of support for school leaders;
- design and articulate a strategy for establishing a professional learning partnership with district and school-based leaders; and,
- engage a variety of district and school-based stakeholders to discuss and design district-wide expectations for partnering in professional learning

Then,

- the district will have sufficient data in order to develop a clear understanding about the current support system for schools leaders; and,
- use this data to make informed decisions to operationalize support for school leaders; and,
- the district will be able to establish clarity, transparency and coherence in the responsibilities of stakeholders for planning, providing, accessing, and engaging in professional learning;

So that,

- the district will be able to clearly communicate a strategy outlining the district-wide expectations for high-quality professional learning for all school-based leaders; and,
- the district will be situated to provide targeted and collaborative professional learning *and structured support* for school-based staff to strengthen school-based leaders' ability to build a culture of high expectations and achievement for all BPS students.

Description

“The biggest impact you can have on an organization is to find one thing—that will help it move forward—and do it well. Even the tiniest change in the right direction is better than no change at all.”
[interview with BPS district office employee, July 24, 2020]

The chief obstacle facing Boston Public Schools is the fundamental disconnect school leaders feel between the activities of the district office and the support they need to provide high-quality equitable instruction to all students. As a result, I pursued a project that sought to identify strategic opportunities for collaboration and support between school-based leadership *and* district office leadership. My aim was to bridge the chasm between school and district leaders by furnishing leaders the opportunity to enhance their capacity to lead with an equity mindset. In the analysis section, I will discuss whether this was the *right* move, both logistically and strategically. Paramount to clearing this hurdle is a looming challenge - gauging how the district manages the reverberations of concurrent catastrophic events which give rise to the current state of the world; and subsequently impact school leaders' ability to focus on improving teacher practice and the academic achievement of all students.

When human communities are forced to adjust to shifting conditions, they experience pain (Kotter, 2012). My residency with the Boston Public Schools took shape in the midst of a harrowing global pandemic and a blistering reckoning with the perpetual asymmetrical treatment of Black people—leading to racial strife and unrelenting unrest from coast to coast on the eve of arguably one of the most important presidential elections in the country's history. Notwithstanding these circumstances, teachers and school leaders found themselves at the epicenter of a national crisis. Like school systems across the world, we were left to answer the question: How do we responsibly educate and care for students' well-being, while balancing the delicate circumstances of parents (and teachers) struggling to return to work? I have included a timeline of national events (red/yellow) juxtaposed with local decisions and leadership moves that directly impacted the BPS leadership team and school leaders. (See timeline in Table 4.1.)

Amid and despite these conditions, school leaders were responsible for ensuring their buildings were safe for the eventual return of staff and students. Starting my residency during the school year gave me the opportunity to meet and build relationships with school leaders and district staff prior to their summer break. ***This was the agonizing reality for the school leaders when I entered my residency on June 1st, 2020.***

Table 4.1

Timeline of national and local events - leadership decisions district in 2020

Date	District and Current Events
January 15*, 2020	Thanks to polymerase chain reaction testing, the first case of the 2019 novel coronavirus is reported in Washington state. The male resident is confirmed positive for COVID-19 (co=coronavirus vi= virus, d = disease, 2019) on January 21, 2020.
February 23, 2020	A white father and son in Glynn County, Georgia pursue and fatally shoot Ahmaud Arbery, an unarmed 25 year old Black man, while he is jogging in their neighborhood.
March 13, 2020	Due to the rising cases of the Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV), also known as COVID-19, the Mayor and Superintendent announce that Boston Public Schools will close from March 17–April 27.
March 13, 2020	At 12:40 a.m., three plainclothes Louisville police officers enter the apartment of Breonna Taylor and fatally shoot her.
March 16, 2020	Last day of in-person classes for all BPS students.
March 17, 2020	The coronavirus is now present in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Nine days later, on March 26, 2020, the United States will lead the world in COVID-19 cases.
March 25, 2020	Governor Charlie Baker announces the closure of all Massachusetts public and private schools through May 4, at the earliest, and subsequently extends it indefinitely.
May 4, 2020	Once it is clear that students will not be returning to school buildings for the remainder of the year, Dr. Cassellius pens a letter to families: “We are prepared to meet the unique needs of our students to continue their learning and provide support to our families. Our team has been working hard to develop plans and collaborating with school leaders to ensure students have access to learning opportunities for the rest of this school year. We will continue to assess and shift how we meet our students’ needs during this unprecedented closure based on feedback.”
May 8, 2020	<i>The New York Times</i> publishes a follow-up article ⁵ to an April 26 article ⁶ which

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/08/us/ahmaud-arbery-video-lawyer.html>

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/26/us/ahmed-arbery-shooting-georgia.html>

	detailed the horrific murder of Ahmaud Arbery and releases video footage of his murder to the public.
May 25, 2020	Four Minneapolis police officers brutally murder George Floyd, by kneeling on his neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds, sparking weeks of protests nationwide and worldwide, after more than two months of isolation due to the spread of the coronavirus.
June 1, 2020	First day of Residency at Boston Public Schools
May 26–June 9, 2020	Americans aligned with the message of “Black Lives Matter” hold peaceful protests in all 50 states . ⁷
July 4, 2020	Local artists paint a “Black Lives Matter” mural on the street in Nubian Square, outside of the Bruce K. Bolling building, where BPS is headquartered.
July 16, 2020	<p>An anonymous member of the High School Heads Association leaks a letter meant for Dr. Cassellius to the <i>Boston Globe</i>. This causes a breach of trust, both among school leaders and with Dr. Cassellius. It is a public distraction from the work of preparing schools for reopening in the fall. Strategically, school leaders release the letter the day after their annual evaluations were completed.</p> <p>“The Association is asking the School Committee and the Superintendent to immediately withdraw the current high school redesign proposal, place a hold on all implementation of proposed changes, immediately address issues of leadership and management in the central office, and collaborate fully and authentically with school leaders over SY2020–21 to revise the plan for all high schools going forward.”</p> <p>As part of the Superintendent’s Strategic Plan, BPS is committed to strengthening the academic performance of our high schools. As high school leaders we share this strong commitment.”</p>
August 13, 2020	The Mayor and Superintendent announce a delay to the start of the school year, from September 10, 2020 to September 21, 2020. (Note: Teachers were scheduled to report to work in person on September 8, 2020.)
August 17-19, 2020	August Leadership Institute: three-day training for school leaders with a focus on implementing CLSP (Culturally and Linguistically Sustaining Practices) and becoming an anti-racist leader.
September 21, 2020	First day of school in BPS; all students are learning remotely.
September 23, 2020	Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron announces that he will not pursue murder charges against the three Louisville officers accused of killing Breonna Taylor.
October 1, 2020	Students prioritized for in-person learning—including those experiencing homelessness; in the care of the Department of Children and Families; in special education public day schools; in English Language Learner programs; and students with disabilities that require specific needs—return to classrooms for two days a week.
October 21, 2020	BPS suspends in-person learning for all students, effective October 22, 2020, as the COVID positivity rate surpasses 5.7%. ¹

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/13/us/george-floyd-protests-cities-photos.html>

December 8, 2020	BPS announces 28 schools will welcome back 1,700 students for in-person learning.
December 14, 2020	The Boston Teachers Union passes a vote of no confidence in the superintendent.
December 22, 2020	Boston Magazine publishes “Inside the Bunker at Boston Public Schools.”

¹ Mayor Marty Walsh indicated that metrics which place the city over the 4% threshold would trigger a change to the district’s plans to have students return to school in person.

In the remainder of the Description, I will articulate the core of my strategic project: the development of the focus area and the implementation of *part of* my theory of action, along with outcomes through the beginning of March 2020. The description of the work is divided into three stages of learning and leading. **Part I** identifies the main challenges that I faced upon entry into BPS as I navigated the terrain and learned the culture. **Part II** captures the pivots I made with my strategic project. Finally, **Part III** illustrates the direct action I took toward completing the strategic project.

1. Through the Looking Glass: June 1, 2020–July 6, 2020
2. Outsider on the Inside: July 7, 2020–October 4, 2020
3. Insider on the Outside: October 5, 2020–March 2020

Through the Looking Glass

“Through the Looking Glass” is a reference to the computer screen, which was used to observe, from a distance, the effects of the district’s shift to remote learning and the close of the school year through Zoom. A looking glass is an antiquated term for what is commonly known as a mirror. In the sequel to the classic novel, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, Alice climbs through a mirror and finds herself in a world where nothing is as it seems. From the onset of the pandemic, we were compelled to peer into the looking glass of our nation and take a closer look at the persistence of racism and inequalities across cross-sectional areas: medical care, housing, employment and education. We could not turn our eyes from the havoc the pandemic was wreaking on the most marginalized communities—both pre- and

mid-pandemic. For Boston Public Schools, the mirror reflected several areas of concern: 1) perpetual inequity in student outcomes by race; 2) a fractured relationship between school leaders and the district office mired by distrust; 3) the absence of a north star—individuals throughout the district are not aligned in their work streams and do not engage in cross-collaboration, which contributes to working in silos.

A report released in 2015 determined that the median net worth of a Black family in Boston was \$8, while the median net worth of a white family was \$247,500 (Munoz, et al.). The preamble to the 2016 Opportunity and Achievement Gaps Policy states: “If there is any city in the Nation poised to bring this vision to pass, it is Boston ... the consequences of not doing so, soon ... would be dire. Boston’s youth and children are an asset, indispensable to Boston’s future” (p. 1). Citing the disproportionately lower achievement and graduation rates of Black and Latino students and gaps in economic attainment, the leadership of Boston Public Schools intensified their focus on inequitable academic opportunities. BPS could no longer simply look at the problem of inequity in their schools—action was sorely needed, in spite of the (con)current crises. Despite the grievous turn of events, school leaders bore the responsibility to ensure all students received a high-quality education, virtually, and indefinitely. They needed the direct support of the district leadership to ensure that this education was afforded to every student equitably and school leaders looked to the district for leadership amid many unknowns.

Yearning To Learn. In an effort to observe their daily practices and interact with school leaders, during the first few weeks of my residency, I shadowed a school superintendent, a former BPS principal completing her first year in this new role. In the meetings I attended, I noticed that the range, type and depth of needs among school leaders varied, most noticeably in proportion to years of experience in the seat. Among those meetings were the weekly School Leader calls on Fridays at 4 p.m., where district staff shared updates and fielded questions on a range of topics. At the first meeting I attended, I gathered from the agenda that the purpose of this meeting was for the district leadership to provide updates on COVID rates and any shifts to

remote/in-person learning and to discuss summer learning opportunities for students. Based on the messages sent in the chat, I found that during these meetings the district either provided incomplete or differing messages from the previous meeting, and it was rare for academics or instructional leadership to be the focal point. (e.g. “That’s not what was shared last week”; “We were told to ... and now we’re being told something different.”) As a result, school leaders often showed signs of angst, frustration and mistrust and left these meetings with more questions than answers, judging from informal conversations and shared documents. Frequently school leaders left these meetings with deliverables which diverted their attention from building their instructional leadership muscle.

School leaders faced many challenges as they ended the school year and began planning for the fall reopening of schools. One issue I observed repeatedly: school superintendents were consumed with “putting out little fires” rather than focusing on supporting school leaders to ensure high-quality instruction in schools (personal communication, senior district leader, 6/2/2020). I reflected on my own leadership as a former school leader who led a school in Brooklyn during Hurricane Sandy and remembered how hard it was to navigate during those perilous and uncertain times. I found myself empathizing with both school leaders and their supervisors, who were “figuring it out” themselves as they attempted to offer guidance and support.

Outsider on the Inside

Stretched to Support School Leaders. In 2016, during their time at PELP, the BPS team set the problem of practice: to “leverage district based staff to focus on instructional support and accountability; which is one way to ensure school-based staff/leadership receive high-quality instructional support.” I traced the steps the district had taken to address the five-year-old problem of practice. My objective was to consider how the district provides support for school leaders to ensure that high-quality instruction takes place in all BPS schools.

As the primary source of support for school leaders, I understood that this time of year was extremely stressful for school leaders and superintendents—especially in the middle of a pandemic. I recall the school superintendent supporting several principals through their hiring process, fielding technology requests from students and teachers, volunteering at the transportation center to answer phones, *and* visiting the school to cover for an absent teacher. Invariably there was an emergent situation which took the school superintendent’s attention away from their job: supporting school leaders to ensure high-quality instruction was taking place onsite. To grasp what school leaders were experiencing, I decided that I needed to stay close to them and their source of support to learn about their explicit needs firsthand.

As an outsider to both the city and the district, through one-on-one interviews and a few school-based meetings, I sought to gauge what was important to BPS staff executing their role and responsibilities. BPS leadership moved quickly to ensure they were responsive to known gaps in equity throughout the district and were not exacerbating them as a result of the move to remote learning. A member of the Executive Cabinet stated: "You really learn who people are in a crisis" (personal communication, S. Jackson, 7/9/2020). This statement prompted me to ask: how was the district being led to handle this crisis, and by whom? Most importantly, what support were school leaders receiving in order to lead through this crisis? Even teachers noticed the response from the district, yet I still was not clear on who was taking the reins on implementation and accountability for pedagogical shifts. One BPS teacher told me, “There is a rise in the district toward an anti-racist pedagogy and we are seeing things change with student-centered thinking” (personal communication with BPS teacher, S. Jackson, 7/6/2020). I wondered: what district-level decisions were being made to support, rather than impede, school leaders in becoming effective instructional leaders, with a focus on racial equity?

To better understand how leaders were being prepared to lead with an anti-racist lens during the upcoming school year, I joined the planning team for the August Leadership Institute

(ALI). I knew aligning myself with the members of the planning team would help me build relationships with school and district leaders while doing the work. ALI's main focus this year was boldly addressing racism through an anti-racist approach (Figure 4.1). The question for reflection was: How can we use an anti-racist lens and culturally and linguistically sustaining practices to plan for the launch of the school year *and* for its duration? As a member of this team, I collaborated with school leaders and district staff to plan professional development sessions. Dr. Ibram X. Kendi and Dr. Bettina Love, two sought-after scholars on the topics of anti-racism and equitable instructional practices, were the keynote speakers for 2020's ALI. With the following pronouncement, the district made public what it had only privately espoused in the past: ***our school leaders must be equipped to lead with a lens of anti-racism and equity at the forefront of our schools and in our classrooms***. I joined the planning team after the smaller working groups had already been formed, so I mostly attended the large group meeting to ascertain the vision for ALI and professional learning within the district, the working style of district staff and the immediate needs of the team leads. I volunteered to create the feedback forms for each session. While these tasks were not a huge contribution to the overall learning experience, they gave me a chance to interact with district staff members in charge of professional learning. Also, through these meetings I was able to meet many of the school leaders I would later work with for PLCs.

Figure 4.1

ALI Focus/Scope of Learning—August 2020

	Day 1 Monday, 8/17	Day 2 Tuesday, 8/18	Day 3 Wednesday, 8/19
ALI Focus	Day 1 Focus: Culturally Responsive School Leadership	Day 2 Focus: Culturally Responsive Equitable Remote Learning Practices	Day 3 Focus: Operational & SEL Support in Reopening the School Year
Strategic Plan Alignment	Strategic Commitments: #1 ELIMINATE OPPORTUNITY and ACHIEVEMENT GAPS: Equitable and excellent student outcomes. #2 ACCELERATE LEARNING: High-quality schools and joyful classrooms district-wide. #3 AMPLIFY ALL VOICES: Shared decision-making, mutual accountability, and partnerships. #5: CULTIVATE TRUST: Caring and competent staff that reflect our students and are focused on service.		
		Strategic Commitments: All of the above (#1,2,3,and 5) and... #6 ACTIVATE PARTNERSHIPS: Expand learning beyond the classroom and connect the community to the classroom.	
Racial Equity Planning Tool Alignment	Desired Results & Outcomes: Purpose	Analysis of Data: Root Cause Analysis	Stakeholder Engagement: Equity Roundtable
	Strategies for Racial Equity: QSP Priorities	Implementation Plan: Action Steps	
		Accountability and Communication: Progress Indicators and Equity Roundtables	

“If you’re in the middle of a forest, and you can’t see the light—pick a direction and just start chopping.”
Plan your work and work your plan.

[1:1 with Assistant Superintendent, July 2020]

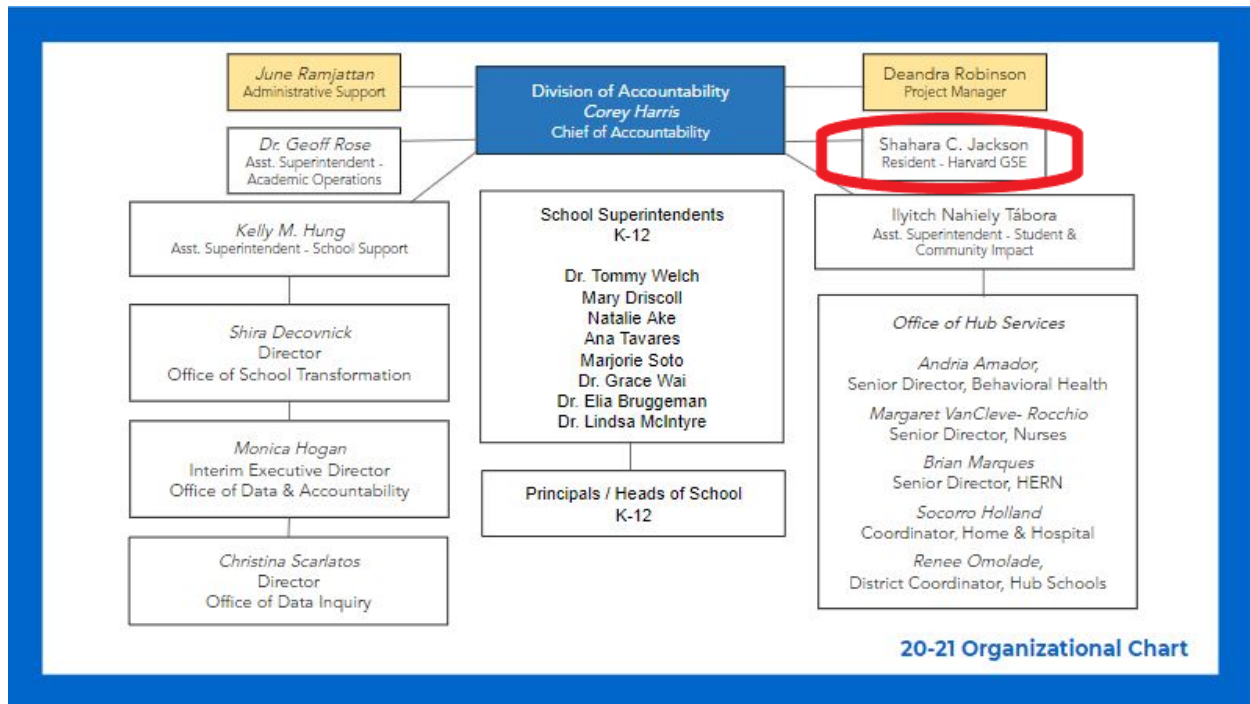
Choosing the Way Forward. The context described above speaks to the complexity Boston Public Schools was facing during this time of crisis, as well as the difficulty I experienced in identifying a strategic project that would benefit school leaders *and* the district while affording me the opportunity to learn and lead. For the duration of my residency, I became a team member within the Division of Accountability, working alongside the Chief of Accountability, Corey Harris (Figure 2). Corey and I discussed my goals for the residency and the strengths I brought to the role. He believed it advantageous for me to attend a variety of meetings and to start thinking about how I could contribute to the district. As an outsider to Boston himself, Corey advised me on navigating local politics and introduced me to several people to ease my

transition. In the interim, I continued to attend meetings virtually and increased the frequency of my one-to-one meetings. Corey and I established a cadence of meeting on Mondays and Thursdays. These bi-weekly meetings were especially helpful during the early days of my residency. On Mondays we spent half an hour setting goals for the week and deciding which meetings I would attend. Our Thursday meetings were an hour long; we spent that time debriefing the week, providing feedback to each other, and discussing how I would use the time in my residency to support the work of the division. With Corey as my residency supervisor, I gained an insiders' view of the system and was able to see the complexity up close; **and** as someone without formal authority, I was circumspect in my rush to judgment.

In mid-July and continuing into August, I made two abortive attempts at a strategic project before arriving at the idea of formulating a partnership between PLC Leads and district staff. One of my first tasks was to create the professional development plan and job description for a Cluster Lead position—a new role in the district that would provide an additional layer of support between school superintendent and school leaders. However, after three weeks of researching, planning and writing for the role, I pivoted away from that project. The school superintendents realized that this would be an additional role for them to manage, and they did not think there was enough time to hire and train the Cluster Leads before the start of the new year. We decided to table this potential leadership pipeline initiative until next year.

Figure 4.2

Division of Accountability Organization Chart 2020–2021



In the interim, I continued holding one-on-one meetings with stakeholders across the district. Based on the interviews I conducted, it was overwhelmingly apparent that school leaders did not feel welcome at the district office, nor did they feel supported by their supervisor and district staff. Three statements impacted me most: “a lack of cultural awareness and competence in my supervisor is impeding my ability to grow. If I have to teach you that your biases are impacting my work, then how do I expect you to teach me about how to work with my staff and the impact their racial biases have on students and families?” (personal communication, 7/29/2020); “this is precisely the time for me, as a school leader, to be developed. When I think about professional learning time, it’s a joke. We need to hear from professionals in the field or read literature, talk with our colleagues and do consultancies with my peers” (personal communication, 8/3/2020); “... all of the training that the district office

offers, and they don't even apply the content to themselves" (personal communication, 8/4/2020).

I was privy to the exit interview data, where former school leaders shared their feedback as they departed the district. Although it was a small sampling (10 former BPS school leaders), many of these sentiments mirror comments that I had already heard during one-on-one interviews.

- "You are treated differently depending on who you know and you walk around wondering what you have to do to make people like you so that you can get something done for your school."
- "It's who you know, it's who you have more of a relationship with—it shouldn't happen at the district level that you have to be best friends with people to get support. It's always been like this."
- "Some of my colleagues have networks and can get stuff, but I don't have a network of colleagues that look like me in my area."
- "Build trust with leaders by recognizing individual strengths and following through on commitments to school leaders and the public."
- "When I came to BPS, I was told by a mentor to trust no one. I learned that this was true."

School leaders expressed a desire to be part of the bigger picture within the district narrative and cultivate trust district-wide. The current climate called for a reappraisal of how school leaders engage with one another and how they are made to feel in the professional learning arena.

Insider on the Outside

Now that I had a clearer picture of my role, Corey and I decided that my residency would focus on some aspect of leadership development and creating opportunities for the district office to support school leaders. Although I had gained standing as a core member of the Division of Accountability team—my workstreams cut across the Office of Leadership Development and the

School Superintendents' office—I needed to clarify the scope and impact of my strategic project. I had used the previous nine weeks to explore all aspects of the organization; now I was beginning to synthesize the information into an actionable plan.

In the September 2 school superintendent meeting, following a debrief of ALI, we discussed shifting our focus to PLCs as a space for ongoing learning for school leaders. For context, two years earlier, Boston's school leaders were introduced to PLCs as an opportunity for peer-to-peer professional learning. Initially, PLCs were led by the Office of Leadership Development, and, in the second year, one of the recently promoted school superintendents led the workstream. Based on 2019–20 survey data, most school leaders viewed PLCs favorably and noted that they were a place for learning and building camaraderie. Meanwhile school leaders were mired in the drudgery of reopening plans and uncertainty about what the upcoming school year would look like. In this period of uncertainty, we agreed that school leaders would appreciate one area of constancy; since PLCs were a bright light from last year, they became the focus of additional support for school leaders. I recognized this as an opportunity to deepen trust, offer tangible support for all school leaders and communicate the value of continuous learning in partnership with the district.

Authority and Authenticity. At the next school superintendent meeting, after a brief conversation about PLCs, I stepped up to take the lead on PLCs for the 2020–21 school year. Using the previous months of relationship-building and my prior experience in professional learning, I learned to balance the informal authority thrust upon me when assigned leadership over the PLC work with managing others' perceptions of changes I wanted to make to the existing structure. My initial move was to set up a meeting for myself and three of the school superintendents to map out a plan for executing PLCs for the year. I classified the work to come into two categories: 1) Creating a trusting and collegial environment to learn and work together and provide feedback on the content, process and results. 2) Executing the PLCs with fidelity, while improving satisfaction over previous years. In this meeting, I mentioned a few challenges,

among them identifying school leaders *and* district staff willing to take this work on amid the pandemic. They reassured me that we would have enough people to fill the roles. I voiced concern about the capabilities and capacity of the individuals tapped to lead this work.

Next, I reviewed feedback from the previous year to see what worked well and what gaps existed in the current PLC model. I learned that, before the move to remote instruction, school leaders felt that “the focus on instruction, intertwined with an equity lens gave participants resources, a plan with support and accountability from the other leaders within the PLC.” School leaders also indicated that “they want to maintain the PLC structure and allow school leaders to identify the area(s) of focus and have a voice in the type of PD that is valuable.” As part of the previous year’s structure, BPS partnered with LLA (Lynch Leadership Academy) to provide coaching and feedback to all PLC Leads. Their support included providing resources for content development, coaching and feedback on content and facilitation. Based on data gleaned from my one-on-one conversations with school leaders and district staff, I concluded that it was critical to include a cross-section of leaders from across the district in the conversation around PLCs. Only then would patterns of success surface; only then would we identify missed opportunities, and ensure support and high-quality professional learning for school leaders accordingly. Additionally, if the partnership between PLC Leads and district office staff and leadership proved successful, then it would also grant us an opportunity to collect data in service of Dr. Casselius’ interim goal 3.2: *School Leader Perception: Improve school leader perception of central office service, effectiveness, and accountability for results.*

With all that in mind, I convened an initial meeting of the entire PLC planning team for October 2 to clearly articulate our vision for PLCs and anticipate needs for the launch and execution. At this point, the planning team consisted of three school superintendents, two members of the Office of Leadership Development, a Principal on Assignment and me. Our outcomes were to develop a collective understanding of roles and responsibilities and to create

a timeline for the execution of PLCs. At this meeting we also discussed a process for decision-making and decided that I would make the final decision in executing tasks.

More importantly, we took the first step (*Plan*) in a PDSA cycle: discussing the benefits of adding a district partner to the current PLC model. In planning for PLCs this year, I had previously floated this idea to the three superintendents, all of whom approved, and they provided feedback on the initial language I used. Instead of the word “partner” I called the district staff member a “sponsor”—an unnecessary hierarchical reference within a culture that hyper-values status. That was not the message I intended to convey so I replaced the word. Considering the iterative cycle of the framework, I asked the team to identify the benefits of adding a district partner and what risks we ran in doing so. Everyone agreed that an additional person would be beneficial to planning and supporting the content, as well as providing facilitation support where needed. One of the existing PLCs already used the paired model of school leader and district leader. Their partnership worked well due to an established relationship built on trust and communication. We agreed to identify partners for the Leads and use the survey results to collect feedback on the partnership.

Prior to the October 2nd meeting, I voiced two concerns to two members of the team which had not been resolved. The first was the rate at which they wanted the PLC process to be executed. They expressed that “school leaders needed to experience a sense of joy and PLCs were a consistent source last year.” I agreed that the district needed a quick win with school leaders, but I also saw how rushing the project might cause avoidable missteps. For example, when one of the school superintendents sent the form to school leaders asking for their input on topics, she forgot to add a field for their name. I caught the error, but not until 50+ school leaders had already completed the form. The second concern was how school leaders were selected to become PLC Leads. There was an application process, yet I found that it was merely a formality because most PLC Leads had been preselected by the school superintendents. This is emblematic of a larger problem within BPS, where individuals are

promoted and given assignments without a transparent process of selection. Continuing to operate in this way erodes trust and confidence in a fair and equitable process of exercising leadership within the district. Knowing that they had already communicated with the (desired) PLC Leads, I still challenged their methodology for selecting PLC Leads. This was an instance where I found myself on the outside, although I was “in” the inner circle of the team.

“Behavior precedes belief—that is, most people must engage in a behavior before they accept that it is beneficial; then they see the results, and then they believe that it is the right thing to do—implementation precedes buy-in; it does not follow it.”

- Doug Reeves

Achieve and Believe. At the conclusion of the selection process, I invited the PLC Leads to a meeting on October 16 with the partner from LLA to discuss the coaching and feedback cycle, and to clarify the supporting role played by the district partner. Before then, I had not introduced the concept of a district partner to the PLC Leads. Initially, there was hesitancy among PLC Leads about the addition of someone from the district to work with them in their PLC. One school leader said, “Do we get to pick our partner? Because I know who I don’t want.” Another school leader stated, “We have Jenne to support us. We don’t need anyone else.” Since this was my first meeting with the school leaders, I decided to alter my strategy and engaged the PLC Leads in a conversation about how the district partner could support them in this work—as opposed to their current thinking, which was “someone from the district is coming to take over our peer community.” After about an hour of dialogue, I learned several district staff members, along with principal supervisors attended PLC sessions last year and, in some instances, attempted to undermine the PLC Lead during the sessions. While this was not widespread, the tight-knit community of leaders did not appreciate the interference and found the outside presence to be more harmful than helpful. I also found out that Jenne was very influential with this group and had served as the leadership coach to 8 out of 10 of the PLC Leads, which is why they relied upon her for support and not the district. We were able to come

to an understanding about the rationale for targeted district support. Once again, absent this vital information, I felt as though I was on the outside of the inner circle of this group.

The PLC Leads agreed that this year was an anomaly and they welcomed the partnership—with the caveat of having autonomy over the selection of the district staff member. I agreed that the partnership should be at their discretion, especially since we were less than two weeks away from the launch. Given the virtual environment and the time constraints, there would not be enough time for the PLC Leads to build a meaningful working relationship with someone they did not already know. I flagged this as another hurdle for the idea of a school-district partnership. If the intention is to create beneficial relationships, it is unrealistic to think that, in the middle of a pandemic, two people can be paired together without a deliberate means of building trust. Being on the outside of this decision was not necessarily a negative, since the PLC Leads were in favor of moving forward with the partnerships, without my assistance.

Two days prior to the launch of PLCs I held a meeting with the Planning Team, the PLC Leads and our LLA partner to discuss logistics and finalize any last minute adjustments to the content and schedule. Noticeably, I did not invite the district partners to this meeting; although one partner attended because he was previously paired with the PLC Lead from last year. At this point, I had not secured a partner for every PLC Lead. At that meeting, three of the ten PLCs had not been paired with a district partner. There were several district partners who were undecided about the commitment and did not confirm their participation. While the absence of the district partners was glaringly apparent to me, it did not seem to diminish the PLC Leads' confidence in starting the work.

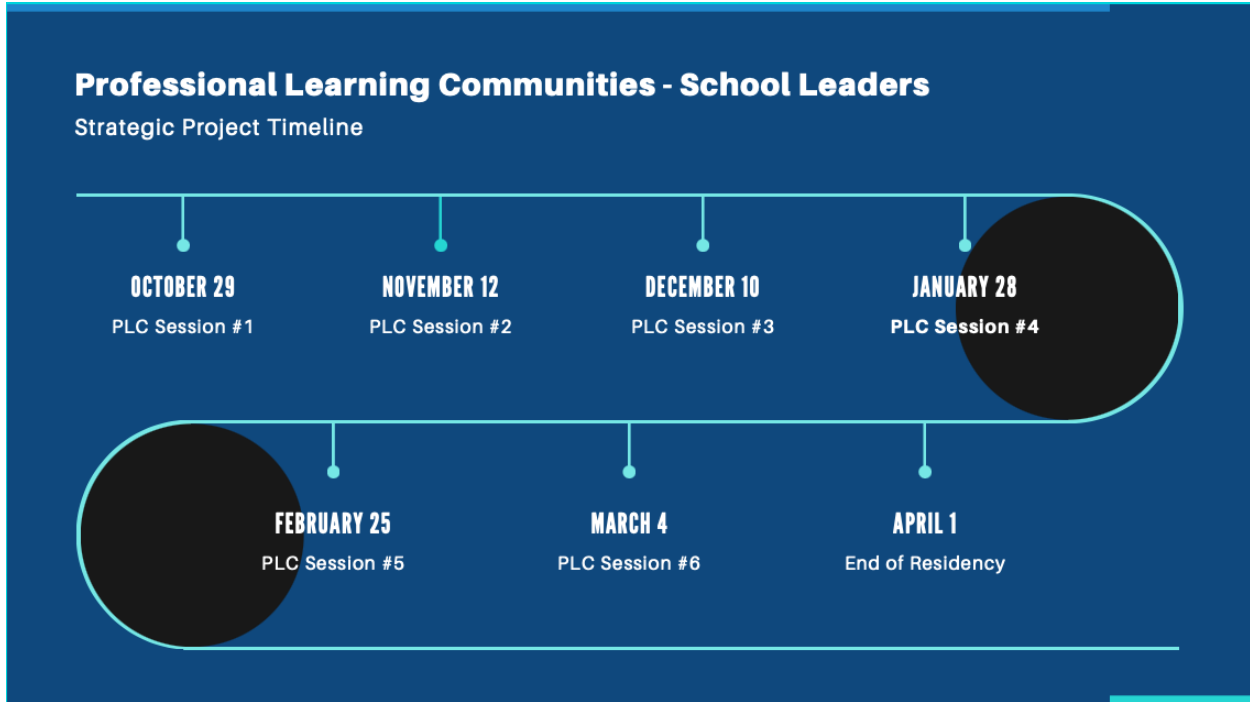
As an additional learning component for school leaders, I invited former BPS school leader, Kim Marshall, to give a brief presentation on the benefits of using the Marshall Memo as a school leader. Kim served as a principal in BPS for over a decade and knows the system well. In addition, he currently coaches several BPS school leaders—two of whom are PLC Leads.

When I initially proposed the idea, the PLC Leads did not think we had enough time for his presentation and pushed back against the invitation. “I don't think his content would be relevant to the launch.” “Maybe we should save him for another time? It's going to be a long day.” I continued to engage them in dialogue and shared that his presence would be an asset to start the PLC sessions for the year. In the end we compromised on the allotted time by reducing his portion to 15 minutes. Although the PLCs were starting a few weeks later than the previous year, everyone was glad to begin PLCs and looked forward to a successful year of learning together. I asked everyone to share what their version of success would look like at the end of Thursday's launch. These are two examples of what was shared. (See Appendix - full responses)

- “Leaders will leave each PLC Thursday afternoon feeling connected to colleagues and prepared to apply their learning to their own leadership and school community to better impact instruction and student learning.”
- “PLCs launch with an inspiring, collaborative, content-rich session, in which equity is the clear lens through which we are approaching teaching and learning, for ourselves and our students. Participants feel connected to the work and to each other.”

Figure 4.3

SY 20/21 Professional Learning Communities—Timeline



Additionally, we concluded the pre-launch meeting with the understanding that we would meet as a team in between the scheduled PLC meetings, (see Figure 4.3); the PLC Leads would meet with their district partners right before and right after each PLC session.

Launched and Loaded. On the afternoon of October 29, we launched the first PLC of the school year on the same day as the All Leader PD. PLCs were scheduled to begin at noon with Kim’s opening presentation and run for 90 minutes. At 11:45 a.m., I realized that I did not have host privileges for the session even though I was tasked with sharing Kim’s slides. For the next 15 minutes, I panicked. The staff member who was running technology was out on a lunch break because she was not aware that PLCs were returning to the main Zoom room before going into their breakout rooms. I did not have a way of contacting her, other than via email, which she was not answering. I called the Director of Leadership Development, who led the All Leader PD that morning, to find out how I could be added as a host. Luckily she had the personal cell number for the room host, who granted permissions at 11:59 a.m. Crisis was averted, yet I was frustrated with myself and wondered how this major logistical issue was

overlooked. At the end of his presentation, Kim shared that he was my leadership coach during the first two years of my principalship and complimented my leadership. After the session, several of the PLC Leads and other school leaders reached out to thank me for having Kim present to them. Two of the PLC Leads mentioned that they had learned new ways of using the Marshall Memo and indicated their intent to use it as a resource for future sessions. According to exit survey data, school leaders overwhelmingly indicated that the flow and content of the PLCs was beneficial to their learning and leading. The data let us know that this was a good start to an unusually unstable year.

Pauses and Pivots. With the constant false starts to the school year, there were a number of scheduling conflicts that preempted our standing meeting, which we scheduled to take place the week before every PLC. In light of this difficulty, during the month of November, instead of trying to find a common meeting time, I suggested we designate a one-hour block of time for “Office Hours.” Via an email thread, I chose to engage the PLC Leads in the PDSA cycle, which was beneficial for testing this minor intervention in a functional system. I presented this intervention as a time for PLC Leads and their partners to drop in for coaching and content support from me and Jenne. (Figure 4.4) Initially, I was not sure how this would work with ten separate PLCs and disparate content. I wanted to ensure that each Lead had an opportunity to check-in with me, as well as receive support from Jenne. Believing it was counterintuitive to the community building aspect of PLCs, I was skeptical about the efficacy of office hours in silos. I did not have confidence that it would fulfill the needs of this group, which until this point had been extremely collaborative.

Figure 4.4

Office Hours notification to PLC Leads and Partners

HOLD: (Optional) PLC Office Hours

Nov 9, 2020 2:00pm to 3:00pm Nov 9, 2020 Time zone

All day Does not repeat ▾

[Event Details](#) Find a Time

Greetings All!

Jenne and I are holding this time on your calendar for PLC Leads to discuss *anything* PLC-related. Feel free to drop in anytime between 2pm -3pm to:

- review content,
- provide your own [feedback](#),
- discuss [participant feedback](#), or
- share ideas

This time/space is 100% optional and breakout rooms will be available, if needed.

At present, we have not scheduled a formal meeting prior to the November 12th session. We understand that there is a lot happening in your school, the district, the country and the world - and we want to be mindful of everyone's physical and mental bandwidth.

Our ask: Please upload your content to the [PLC Google folder](#) by Monday, November 9th. If this is not feasible, please reach out for support.

Going forward, please upload all content at least one week prior to the next scheduled session. Session dates are listed on the [PLC Final List](#) and shared below, for your convenience. A formal calendar invite for all session dates is forthcoming ...

Thank you again for your commitment and hard work!

Peace.
Shahara

On Saturday, December 5, school leaders were told that schools were slated to reopen on December 14 for in-person learning. This news, while good for many stakeholders, put pressure on school leaders to enact plans to ensure that they were prepared for in-person learning. Many of the school leaders' concerns were rooted in filling the staffing gaps in their buildings. One PLC Lead shared that six staff members were out indefinitely due to COVID-related illnesses, either of their own or family members. This news caused us to forego the previously scheduled pre-meeting for the December 10 PLC. Instead, we used the December 7 office hours as an opportunity for the PLC Leads and their district partners to drop in for support from Jenne and me. During office hours, we worked with PLC Leads to adjust the length of their content, whether that was because of an anticipated decrease in attendance or the need to switch from a 4.5-hour session to a 2-hour session.

In the execution of the S (*Study*) in the PDSA framework, I asked the PLC Leads to pause our original plan and consider a pivot based on factors beyond our control. The PLC Leads recognized the inherent value of the PLCs, yet we also knew they needed to be carried out with fidelity and the undivided attention of school leader participants. The PLCs were either shortened or rescheduled twice—again in January and February—due to revised reopening plans, which forced school leaders to choose between focusing on their own learning and creating an environment where staff and scholars are prepared to lead and learn.

Adjust. While the A in the PDSA Framework stands for *Act*, we had to quickly “adjust” to a new paradigm that met the needs of both the PLC Leads and the district partners. Ultimately, we conducted three months of bi-monthly office hours for PLC Leads and their district partners. While the majority of the pairings found it to be helpful and a consistent source of support, the challenges were rooted in the same issues which led us to office hours: scheduling time to meet that was convenient for both partners. At the time of writing this Capstone, there remain obstacles for PLC Leads and their participants to overcome, while focusing on their own growth and development. The April 29 PLC is set to take place the same day students return for in-person learning—after a thirteen-month hiatus from in-person schooling. Many of the PLC Leads spent time during their Spring Break preparing to welcome students back and creating materials for their PLCs. Although my residency officially ended on April 1, I am continuing to support the logistics of PLCs and provide support with instructional materials for the PLC Leads. I believe that taking action on my part and making adjustments to the official residency calendar will continue to build trust with the PLC Leads and their district partners.

Evidence

Defining the Evidence

In this section, I share the evidence of the strategic project—building a bridge between school leaders and district office leadership—along with the elements of a design which I consider a feasible strategy for moving the district toward the end goal. This evolved from my initial effort, to create a strategy to cultivate coherence in district-wide professional development, to an interactive pilot that brought school leaders together with district staff to increase their capacity to lead with an equity lens.

Success can be defined as a favorable or desired outcome and the accomplishment of an aim or purpose. The focus of my strategic project, *in the long term*, was to create a strategy for building a bridge between school-based leadership, district office staff and leadership. Initially, I envisaged the outcome of the initial project as a robust document replete with flowcharts and tables outlining recommendations. Yet, after a few months of interviews and interactions with district leadership, I understood this to be a complex **and** ongoing assignment.

In providing a cogent understanding of what support looks like, I think it is important to define the word and clarify a tangible means of measuring support for school leaders in particular.

support:

v. bear all or part of the weight of, hold up; give assistance to, suggest the truth of, back up

n. a thing that bears the weight of something or keeps it upright; material assistance

In light of these selected definitions, I propose that support can be an action, a tool and/or a physical manifestation. Based on that interpretation of the definition, support for school leaders may range from receiving a delivery of headphones for teachers to use during remote instruction, to providing guidance on how to improve their instructional leadership skills, to helping compose an email response to the community after an disfavored decision has been

made. In extreme cases, it could be someone who comforts a school leader when they lose a student to senseless gun violence or when a member of their staff dies suddenly.

Throughout the district, many sources of support are available to school leaders, both formal and informal, but not all sources are made available equally or equitably. The primary source of support for school leaders is their (regional) school superintendent. In Boston Public Schools, there are eight superintendents (six elementary and two high school), with varying levels and areas of expertise. The school superintendent's primary role is to coach and evaluate school leaders on instructional leadership, among other leadership categories on the state-approved evaluation rubric.

Table 5.1

Phases of Residency - Evidence of Strategic Project

Phase	Theory of Action	Evidence
I.	<i>If I, examine the current internal and external mechanisms of support for school leaders;</i>	<p>Interviewed 20+ internal and external stakeholders who provide direct support to school leaders.</p> <p>Visited schools and conducted walkthroughs with school leaders</p> <p>Drafted “School Leader Support” crosswalk document to outline the level/type of support provided to school leaders</p> <p>Beginning in November 2020, co-facilitated region meetings with elementary school superintendent</p>
II.	<i>If I, design and articulate a strategy for establishing a professional learning partnership with district and school-based leaders;</i>	<p>Worked with PLC Leads to identify district-based partners</p> <p>Crafted agendas and facilitated meetings the PLC Planning Team and with PLC Leads</p> <p>Provided technical, instructional and content support for PLC Leads</p> <p>Worked with district partners to mitigate obstacles to support for school leaders</p> <p>Created session surveys for PLCs, disaggregated and analyzed data to determine session satisfaction and effectiveness</p>

		<p>Held office hours to create a collaborative space for PLC Leads to convene and work with one another, their district partners and Lynch coach</p> <p>Engaged PLC Leads in the structure of the PDSA cycle framework to determine effectiveness of the district-based partnership</p> <p>Provided feedback to PLC Leads on content and facilitation</p>
III.	<p><i>If I, engage a variety of district and school-based stakeholders to discuss and design district-wide expectations for partnering in professional learning</i></p>	<p>In collaboration with the Office of Leadership Development, we used survey data to reflect on and assess the effectiveness of the teams which facilitated and designed content for ALI (August Leadership Institute), All Leader Professional Learning Days and PLCs.</p> <p>Worked with the Districtwide Professional Development Steering Committee to create a scope and sequence for all BPS staff to engage in professional learning</p> <p>Co-created work plan for School Leader competencies: Phase 1 - Focusing/Drafting Phase 2 - Drafting and Refining Phase 3 - Sharing and Initial Use Phase 4 - Initial Stakeholder Engagement Phase 5 - Continued Stakeholder Engagement and Revision Phase 6 - Presentation, Socialization and Integration</p> <p>*Modified competencies for school leaders based on feedback from stakeholders *Formalize a plan with School Superintendents to use competencies to inform coaching, practice and professional learning *Present rollout plan to the Superintendent and Office of Opportunity Gaps *Present competencies to school Leaders and create activities for SLs to set goals, reflect, design PL to become familiar with the competencies *Use the REPT (Racial Equity Planning Tool) to prepare for SY21–22 rollout of competencies</p>

*ongoing activities through June 2021

When the relationship between PLC Leads and their district partner was beneficial, the partnership proved to be a microcosm of the larger strategy BPS can employ to forge intentional, mutually beneficial relationships between school leaders and district office staff,

ultimately leading to success for all students. The partnership of PLC Leads and district staff contributed to stronger professional relationships between leaders, which were fortified by shared learning experiences. These outcomes also confirmed that creating conditions that cultivate relationships between leaders may also yield an increase in collaboration across the board. Leaders need structures to help them develop and sustain the types of relationships that affect student learning. Partnering to meet an individual leader’s need is not, by itself, enough to effect change at the school level district-wide. School leaders determined that their collaboration was most effective in the thought-partnering stage. Time constraints and scheduling conflicts were a source of frustration and prevented regular meetings between some pairs. Others opted not to meet and employed the services of an outside coach for support. There needs to be systematic engagement and practice employed on all levels to shift the organizational practices of support for school leaders within the district.

Mid-Year Report. (Quantitative Data from PLC Leads - February 2021) *Survey results averaged 3.6 on a 4-point scale in all five of our PLC priority areas. The mid-year results on the PLC Lead/District partnership ranged from 3–3.83 (based on a 4-point Likert scale).*

Please indicate the benefit of the partnership in the following areas: [Content Design/Planning]	3.8
Please indicate the benefit of the partnership in the following areas: [Session Facilitation]	3
Please indicate the benefit of the partnership in the following areas: [Thought-partnering at any stage]	3.83
Please indicate the benefit of the partnership in the following areas: [School Leader Support (during or in between PLCs)]	3.2

(Qualitative Data from PLC Leads - February 2021) *In what way(s) would you want (to see) the district partnership strengthen/improve with PLC Leads for next year?*

- There needs to be a clear throughline across all PLCs. The PLC Leads should be aware of the other course offerings to leaders so we have an understanding of how the individual PLCs are connected.
- Align to district's Strategic Plan and overarching anti-racist work
- Jenne Grant (Lynch Leadership) has been our partner and has been instrumental in supporting our vision and delivery of PDs.
- I did not meet regularly with my partner, but it sounds nice if the pairing is right!
- Regular standing meetings prior to each PLC session would be really helpful.
- I appreciate the partnerships but I wonder how they saw themselves in the four areas we were asked to address? Were those expectations identified to them?
- A clearer vision on outcomes and participant experience, clear expectations.

Normalizing the conditions for support and collaboration, as well as establishing credibility and reliability, will improve partnerships with PLC Leads. I learned that some PLC Leads did not want to work with certain district personnel based on past experiences, while other partnerships were successful *because of* a preexisting relationship with the district leader or hearsay about their reputation.

In conclusion, if PLC Leads continue to employ this model with school leaders throughout the district, they will increase coherence in their approach to instructional support with district-school-based partners. School superintendents would have data to use in their one-on-one meetings with school leaders and in discussions about possible improvements to the methodology. Just over halfway through PLCs, the data indicates a successful model across the district, with room for improvement. Should BPS decide to keep the partnership model for PLCs, it would signal an investment in sharing knowledge and best practices for school leaders. Also, it would shift the perception that “district office staff create work for school leaders, and do not engage in the work themselves.” These partnerships solidified a foundation of trust—albeit

among a handful of school leaders—and showed what a bridge for supporting all school leaders looks like.

Analysis

“Being a human is hard, demonstrating humanity is not.”

— Shahara C. Jackson

This section examines the rationale behind the actions I took throughout this strategic project. I consider which actions were successful in moving the project forward and where the project fell short in execution. I will reflect on my beliefs, biases and blindspots, which all contribute to the end result of the strategic project. Using Francis Frei’s Trust Triangle, I am able to diagnose where my intent and impact was aligned and where I contradicted myself in my attempt to execute my theory of action. I also look at the organizational structure of BPS to see where the district is or is not on track with my strategic project.

Mindset Shift

In August, after hearing me describe the work I was about to undertake, one of my pod-mates remarked, “What if the leadership work is about ‘shifting the mindset of the people,’ and not a splashy project?” At the time I could not conceive of the work **not** producing a tangible result. Yet, after nine months, the shift in mindset is not limited to the people I have worked with in BPS. I, too, have undergone a shift in mindset and in my approach to the work of leadership development, professional learning and building trusting relationships. My thoughts last summer centered on an output that is visible **and** successful. I definitely had an opinion on what “success” could look like at the end of my residency. I knew what I did not want: “to fail.” The story I made up about failure was based on what I viewed as merely existing and easily being forgotten. This is directly tied to what was revealed in my personal ITC (Immunity to Change)

map. As I approached this project, I thought about whether it was worth tackling, whether it was an adequately grandiose project. Grappling with the notion of failure, I constructed a title for my work because having a title made the work and my contribution *real*—or so I thought. I situated myself in the work directly tied to school leaders and district leadership, and I fixated on cultivating an environment that would build coherence and trust as a goal in itself and as a way of shifting culture. Yet what I found was a variant of Peter Drucker’s famous words, “culture + lack of trust” eats “strategy + coherence” for breakfast. ‘The way we do things around here’ is not the same culture that is espoused. A few months into my residency I realized that I needed to shift my gaze from focusing solely on results to the process of building trust.

Trust and Beliefs

Reflecting on the third iteration of my theory of action, I sought to both build **and** be a bridge between the district office and school leaders. I analyzed concrete successes and opportunities through the lens of the three drivers comprising Frances Frei’s Trust Triangle—authenticity, logic and empathy.

Authenticity: People trust us more if they sense we are being authentic with them, i.e. when they think they are interacting with the real you.

(Rigorous) **Logic:** We are trusted when people respect the process we use to arrive at our decisions, when we communicate them effectively, and when they have faith in our judgment and competence.

Empathy: Trust is lost when people feel we focus mostly on ourselves, not on them, instead of caring about them.

Using these lenses, I gained perspective on how my choices, actions, and behaviors affected the intended outcomes of my project and the process I used to get results. Roots of this framework exist in Aristotle’s writing, which grounds persuasive cases in *logos*, *pathos*, and

ethos (Frei, p.49). Throughout the strategic project and my tenure at BPS, I found it necessary to persuade a number of people to “trust me”.

In to Me I See. A strong foundation of trust allows for an emotional exchange without fear of reprisal. Frei states, “I am willing to be led by you because I trust you. I am willing to give up some of my cherished autonomy and put my well-being in your hands because I trust you” (p.33). However, a foundation of trust is reciprocal; the more that trust is built, the better the relationship, especially in times of crisis. “In turn, you’re willing to rely on me because you trust me,” Frei continues (p. 34). I have been reminded of My own experience leading through a crisis during Hurricane Sandy in October 2012. the constantly moving parts and rapid decision-making called for clear communication and oftentimes unwavering trust. Knowing that mistakes are likely to abound with rapid-fire decisions being made, a foundation of trust can mitigate the effects of an honest error in judgment by leadership.

Before I started my residency, I convinced myself that I needed to leave prints in the district which, as an outsider, I believed would be a sign of my commitment to the students and adults of Boston. I took stock of the many facets of my personal and professional life and considered how I could complement the needs of the district during my residency experience. Some of this thinking was revealed through the Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory, which I believe to be a worthwhile source for understanding personal behaviors and dispositions. Having taken this assessment four times in the last two decades, I tend to align with the ENFP type, which means I generally look at the big picture before taking in specific details and process decisions based on how I feel before considering the logical implications of those decisions. I thought this information was critical data to digest as I approached my residency experience and this particular strategic project. Another distinctive feature of the ENFP type is processing emotions as an introvert yet planning ideas as an extrovert (Priebe, 2015). I also relied on data from my StrengthsFinder assessment to lead in an authentic manner. (Appendix

E - StrengthsFinder definitions) These data points helped to keep me grounded and operate authentically while being reflective about how I showed up during this process.

1. **Activator** - Make things happen by turning thoughts into action. Do now, talk later.
2. **Woo** - Meet new people and win them over. No such thing as a stranger.
3. **Positivity** - Contagious enthusiasm. Build strong relationships that hold a team together
4. **Empathy** - Hears the unvoiced questions. Anticipates the need. People are drawn to them.
5. **Developer** - Recognize and cultivate the potential in others. Signs of growth in others are fuel.

I organized my analysis by reflecting on the process of building trust in the three phases of my residency experience. Throughout each phase I focused on the actions of building or eroding trust; and creating the conditions for trust to extend from the district office to school leaders.

1. **Through the Looking Glass: June 1, 2020–July 6, 2020**

The culture of BPS is particularly entrenched in politics, favoritism and a quest for power. I say this as a lifelong resident of New York, as if the same cannot be said of my fair city. However, entering a new city, where politics permeate every aspect of life, I was interested to see the politics play out in real time. Politics rule almost every aspect of our lives. This does not make politics innately negative, as I have learned time and again; instead, it affords us an opportunity to understand the nuances of power and subtleties of influence. As an outsider to the district, I relied upon the wisdom of local contacts I made through my sorority and began to learn the history of the district from an insider's perspective. I could hear my dad's voice and the sage, politically savvy advice he gave to me and my older sister: "It's not what you know. It's not who you know. It's who knows you." I interpreted his advice to include this implicit caveat: *It's who knows **and** trusts you ...*

Guided by this personal political lens, I sought out to be known as more than “the Resident.” This preoccupation proved to be more of a mental challenge than I had anticipated, and I was filled with conflicting feelings about what it means to be ***known and trusted***—no matter the role or title. The first mindset I had to shift was my own.

Entering the BPS community was a challenge, primarily due to the limitations the pandemic placed on human interaction which curtailed my ability to be able to “read the room”, observe body language and see personal interactions up close, all of which is visible data. Instead I chose to collect noticeable data during meetings. I took copious notes from the chat, observed who kept their camera on and who never turned their camera on, and I closely watched the facial expressions among the squares. If I was going to build relationships, I needed to be proactive. During one Friday afternoon meeting, I noticed a school leader wearing a Howard University sweatshirt. As an HBCU alum, I took pride knowing there was another HBCU alum in the meeting. Heifetz sees this as understanding that we have more than just one identity and it is important to acknowledge our relationship to our identities (2009, p.183). Immediately, I reached out to the school leader via email and introduced myself as a fellow HBCU alum, hoping to make an authentic connection with her. I was grateful when she emailed me back right away, but she shared that it was “college Fridays” at her school and she did not attend an HBCU. We laughed about my assumption and I asked her if she would be open to a one-on-one interview; gladly she obliged. Whether it was an item of clothing, a geographic reference or membership in the same organization, I seized opportunities to be known and to get to know leaders within the district, in spite of the physical limitations. Throughout the residency I used opportunities to “woo” people into conversation. This was but one instance where I used a facet of my identity to connect with school leaders and “*be known*” while developing a relationship built on a foundation of trust.

Authenticity worked in my favor as well, and I became known as “the woman on the Zoom with the good energy” (personal communication, 8/6/2020). Whether I was conversing

with someone about reopening during a Task Force meeting or conducting a one-on-one, I was able to learn information from staff members that would be *virtually* impossible in this current context. The relationships I built were not intended to be a one-way street of information sharing, and I made sure that I would follow up if someone requested information from me. In a sense, I became a source of support for those with whom I interacted. My ability to deliver on requests was directly tied to the fact that I did not have a large role to play and had very few responsibilities at the onset of my residency.

2. Outsider on the Inside: July 7, 2020–October 4, 2020

In to You I See. As I consider the approach I took during this residency experience, I recognize that, as a Resident, I was radically ambitious, and perhaps unduly hopeful about what I would be able to accomplish in ten months, during multiple pandemics. In July, my theory of action was extremely long, slightly disconnected and absolutely unattainable. I shared this with Corey and he indicated that my initial plan was a multi-year project and would take a cross-departmental effort. At this time, our focus was on recovering from the end of the school year and planning for the year ahead. I was frustrated that the focus was not on what I thought was an important lever for improving the practice of school leaders. I realized that there were systemic barriers to ensuring this work could actually be done at the district level. I reflected upon previous experience of working *alongside the district*, and I saw clearly that change happens at the speed of trust. Contrary to my prior experience and previously held beliefs, warp speed is difficult to reach when the conditions are suboptimal. A mantra that was heard throughout the district, since the pandemic struck, was “Maslow before Bloom”. There were basic needs that were unmet and the district was correct to keep their focus on the well-being of students before undertaking a massive revamp to their leadership development department.

After three months of interviewing BPS staff across the district, I learned that there are strong opinions about the effectiveness of the district office, from outside *and* inside the district office. (Note: I refrain from saying central office throughout the capstone because I believe children are at the center of this work— a thought I have repeated with every encounter.) Since I was completing my residency at the district office, I chose to distinguish myself as a *Resident in*, rather than as an *employee of*, the district office. In limiting myself to the resident title, I did not readily accept the responsibilities, and often the stigma, that came with representing the district office. When I engaged with school leaders, I presented myself as a colleague, someone who could understand their experience and empathize with their current struggles. In doing so, I found that the school leaders were vulnerable with me and divulged details of their daily interactions with “the district.” I conducted each of my one-on-one conversations with the same three questions in mind: What’s working well—what bright spots are there in the district? What are the key areas of growth—are we moving in the right direction to address them? If you had 15 minutes with Dr. Cassellius, what would you share or like to know? Through these interviews, I learned about the support that school leaders received and their view of its effectiveness. I asked these questions in this particular order to ensure that I was not approaching the interviews from a deficit lens.

As a former principal, I held biases about the capacity and competence of district office staff. I believed that many of the former leaders who worked in the district office did so because they were ineffective in their schools. Oftentimes this was the case in New York, and I carried those beliefs into my residency experience. It did not help that during an interview with a school leader, I learned “trust in the capacity and competence of the district office has been eroded with the COVID response.” (personal communication, 11/9/2020) These biases surfaced during my initial interactions with my residency supervisor, who was, admittedly, overwhelmed by her new role, did not feel supported, and was navigating this process in the midst of a pandemic. How could I possibly blame her for not supporting me through an onboarding process? I was

reminded by another school superintendent that she was not onboarded in the previous school year, which meant she was learning alongside me. While we developed a positive rapport at the beginning of my residency, I neglected to extend grace to her as she worked to figure out how to engage me as a Resident. In this instance the authentic me lacked patience and understanding, which did not allow me to consider the long-term implications of shifting to work with *her* supervisor.

The act of shifting residency supervisors affected my relationship not only with her, but also with many on the school superintendent team. With this move, I broke her trust and created an additional hurdle just five weeks into my residency. While I did not initiate or finalize the decision to change supervisors, she shared that “she felt disrespected and I could have fought harder to stay with her” (personal communication, August 7, 2020). I believe that my decision to accept the shift was a result of my own frustration with not being known or seen. I did not feel affirmed or a sense of value for what I brought to the role of Resident. When I brought this up to her, I was told to wait and to have patience - which I did not have a lot of. The effects of the change in residency supervisor proved to be costly when I sought to join the ALI Team, which planned professional learning for school leaders. Initially my request to join the team was ignored, but I persisted and found a way to ingratiate myself with the ALI Team Lead. I was forced to spend valuable time thinking about and controlling the narrative of who I was and what I offered to the school superintendent team and to the district. I also recognized that I would need to build each relationship individually on that team.

My initial interactions with my former supervisor solidified a preconceived notion about the competence and capacity of district office staff. While the espoused intentions of my former supervisor were honorable, the impact of her actions left me in a precarious position to start residency. I sensed a genuine desire for my well-being, and I was left wondering how the feeling of a supervisor being overwhelmed affected school leaders. I used this as an opportunity to explore the political frame and navigate the district on my own. I chose to network and build

coalitions with other individuals throughout the district. It was during this period that I decided to “meet people” virtually and gain the perspective of various stakeholders across the system. Bolman and Deal would refer to my actions as *reframing*—sizing things up and figuring out what’s really going on. Reframing requires an ability to think about things in more than one way (2014). I discovered that I needed to shift my mental model and take action to navigate a complex situation.

3. Insider on the Outside: October 5, 2020–March 2020

On the Balcony with Empathy. Leadership itself is hard. Leadership in the middle of a pandemic is grueling, fatiguing, **and** unrelenting. In light of the initial interviews I conducted for the first 2–3 months of my residency, I used inductive and deductive reasoning to guide my steps in formulating the basis for my strategic project. I learned that school leaders were overwhelmed and that many felt undersupported by the district. Using Heifetz’s practical recommendations, including “getting on the balcony”—getting far enough above the fray to see the key patterns, identifying and sharing the burden with partners, finding a sanctuary, and preserving a sense of purpose—I was able to “see” the needs and make recommendations.

I believed a single creative and intuitive solution would solve two problems: school leaders feeling overwhelmed and the trust gap that exists across the district. This thinking was not totally incorrect, yet the implementation process failed to consider many factors which would have improved the overall design of the partnership.

Logical Thinking. By suggesting that district partnership support school leaders as a goal, I had hoped that the partnership model would: a) help build relationships between leaders through shared learning experiences; b) create conditions that support relationships between leaders and lead to increased collaboration; and c) provide leaders with the needed structures to help them develop and sustain the type of relationships that could affect student learning.

Frei says, when wobbly logic is the problem, go back to the data, root the case in evidence and *stop there* (Frei, 2020, p. 45). I knew from interviews that the school leaders were overwhelmed and could not take on an additional task without support from the district office—even though PLCs were favored and desired by school leaders. I instantly devised a solution without taking sufficient time to delve into the root cause of some of the competing problems that the district and its leadership were facing—both centrally and at schools. In the “rush to act,” I made some missteps in my proposal of a new approach for PLCs that seemingly were successful. Feeling the sense of urgency from two of the superintendents, I wanted to establish a quick win and gain their favor, so I made an assumption about what the PLCs lacked, instead of approaching the project from an asset lens. Since one of the superintendents led the PLCs last year, I overlooked a wealth of knowledge by taking on the work alone and not pausing to engage her in the planning. Although there was a planning team, I presented ideas to them instead of asking questions about what was successful in the two previous years and why. At the time, my thought was they are too busy to take on this work, and I am smart enough to figure it out by myself. Thinking in this way isolated me from the team even further, which was certainly not my intent; however, the impact led to two members of the team not feeling valued. It was not surprising that two of the superintendents stopped attending the planning meetings. Again, I demonstrated a lack of patience and it cost me—in time and relationship.

Learning from what other people know is one remedy for the logic wobble. As Frei states, “Other people’s insights are among the most valuable—and overlooked—resources in the workplace, but accessing them requires a willingness to reveal that you don’t have all the answers, something leaders resist” (Frei, p.45). To a few members on the planning team, I appeared to enter the space as an inerrant voice on professional learning; based on my previous work experiences. I acknowledge that in my attempt to push the work along where I thought it needed strengthening, I could have benefitted from engaging the historical knowledge that existed on the team. After requesting feedback from one member of the planning team, I

was told that my questions were perceived as construing a negative outlook and I did not approach a particular conversation with an asset-based lens. My internal response to that feedback was that I fashioned myself as a “fixer”. If I see what I perceive to be a problem, I fix it. What I did not consider is there were people involved in creating the PLCs and if I say they are broken, I am in some way placing blame on the people and not the program itself. In fact, the implication is that I somehow see the people as broken and I need to fix them. Therefore, any rejection that I experience is a result of someone rebuffing the notion that they need to be fixed.

Urgency vs. Rush. “Emergent strategy is a way that all of us can begin to see the world ... if in fact we can unlock some crucial understanding about our own humanity if we pay closer attention to this place we are from, the bodies we are in” (Brown, p. 6). Like Brown, I had a tendency to shy away from uncovering the crucial empirical evidence needed to make decisions; instead, I looked at what I thought was the whole picture and rushed to judgment. In the initial September 2 planning meeting with the two school superintendents, I asked what ***I could do*** to support the work and failed to ask why we were taking certain actions. That unasked pertinent question could have prevented an ill-timed misstep from the onset. In the initial survey sent to school leaders, we asked if they wanted to recommend any additional PLC topics, and if they would be interested in planning and/or facilitating the sessions—yet it did not include a space for their name. While I did not create the survey or vet it beforehand, I did not question the actions of someone who had done this last year seemingly very well.

I found myself constantly uncovering “new information,” which at times made me seem as though I was unaware or incompetent. Sometimes it was a minor piece of information, such as the existence of a Google folder with numerous resources that I would not have to duplicate, sometimes something as monumental as there being no money set aside in the budget last year for PLCs—it was now my responsibility to find the funds to pay the school leaders. I recognized that I needed not to take personally what I perceived to be the deliberate action of withholding information and continue to ask questions. “Leading from an inquiry stance thus reflects an

expanded, and we argue, transformative view of leadership practice. This “expanded view of practice” supports leaders’ efforts to generate new knowledge from the practice of leading itself, and thus has intrinsic interest and value for other school and system leaders, as well as for those who provide professional development and further education in leadership.” (Lytle, p.153)

School leaders had been working non-stop since the pandemic hit in March in the lead-up to the September planning meeting and the October kick-off.. Even before the pandemic, their need for ongoing professional improvement had not been a district priority, and was eventually overshadowed by requests to ensure schools were running safely and smoothly. PLCs were viewed by school leaders and the school superintendents as an opportunity to create a sense of normalcy in the midst of chaos.

“The real trick in life is to turn hindsight into foresight that reveals insight.”

—Robin Sharma

Implications for Site

As home to the oldest elementary and high schools in the United States, Boston has always been one step ahead of the rest of the country when it comes to education. Amid the challenges facing the nation, Boston Public Schools is striving to maintain the trailblazing pace it set four centuries ago. Leaders at every level of the district are experiencing an inordinate level of stress, trauma and uncertainty in leading themselves and others through a significant racial reckoning layered on top of a paralyzing global pandemic.

Early in my residency, I had the privilege of interviewing over 50+ staff members and leaders throughout the district, encompassing nearly every role associated with school- and district-based leadership. Through these interviews, I learned of a fundamental disconnect between the activities of the district office and the support needed by school leaders to provide all BPS students with access to high-quality equitable instruction. The underlying sentiments of displeasure with the district before March 2020, along with the current context casts a spotlight upon existing challenges at the heart of my strategic project: the need to build a bridge between the district office and school leaders. Building a bridge is a daunting task that cannot be accomplished without trust *or* a truss, which is an assembly of beams that creates a rigid and solid foundation. Put simply, in order to build a bridge of any kind, there must be sustained trust at the foundation.

While there are several technical shifts that can and have been enacted to reduce tension within the district, many of the challenges facing Boston Public Schools are adaptive and require an approach that will likely prove disorienting. In light of these complex truths and the prospect of stepping into the unknown, Heifetz et al. (2009) reminds us that, when leading from a position of authority, one's responsibility is to provide three *essentials*: direction, protection and order (p.28). However, leading solely from a position of authority, without including the voices of those carrying out the work, does not create an environment of trust. The

result may yield reluctant compliance, refusal to comply or a variation of those two responses. The authority figures within the district need to begin to exercise leadership by galvanizing the school leaders to ask hard questions and then manage the resulting distress. This is in direct opposition to the conventional and current frame of “leadership” within the district. Adaptive leadership is the ability to cultivate emotional fortitude and maximize their followers’ well-being instead of their comfort (p.37). For its part, the district made attempts to tackle one of its perpetual challenges—communication between the district and school leaders—even in the midst of a global pandemic. One of the technical shifts the district made was to improve communication was to initiate a bi-weekly school leader call and send a weekly written summary to school leaders. While these two efforts were designed to improve communication, both added anxiety and stress to school leaders, unnecessarily. During the bi-weekly calls, many school leaders had more questions than answers - seemingly because they were not consulted about the agenda items ahead of time. Some school leaders would say the results of this specific approach to strengthening communication--which Heifetz et al would describe as exercising authority by implementing more technical solutions, rather than leadership by building relational trust --further exacerbated existing tension and did not solve the issue of communication challenges. Notwithstanding its many committed and talented workforce across the district, to build a bridge between the daily functions of school-based leadership and the district office staff and leadership, **BPS must bridge gaps in trust by providing reliable authority functions—direction, protection and order—alongside good leadership that facilitates adaptive work through relationship building or be prepared to lose a cadre of school leaders.**

Building A Foundation of Trust

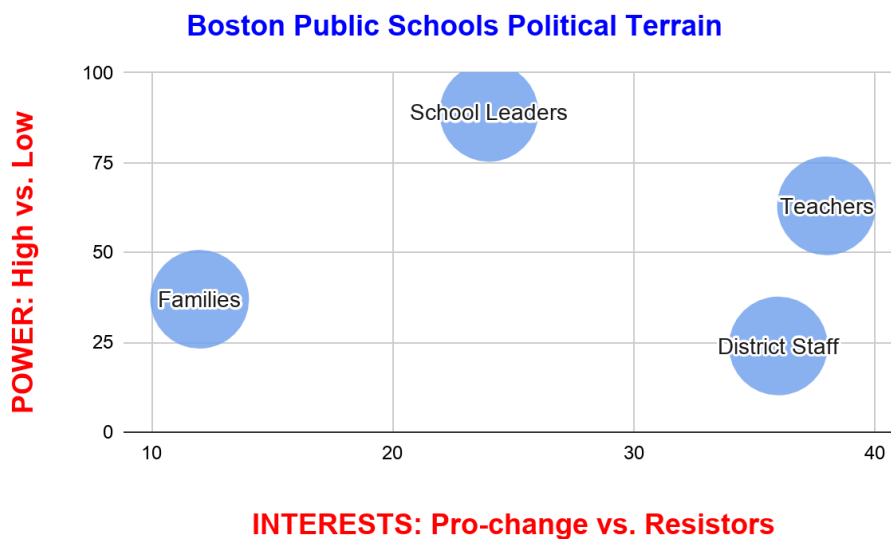
Trust is a feeling of confidence and a constructed belief in someone or an entity. Earlier I referred to Frie’s three facets of trust: authenticity, empathy and logic. When people or

organizations are credible, they are perceived as being trustworthy or believable. According to Covey (2017), “trust is founded on two factors: our credibility and our behavior” (p. 42). The former can be measured by the consistency of our words, while the latter is measured by the impact of our actions. There is very little trust in the district office among school leaders within BPS. This fact was illuminated through one-on-one conversations with staff and leaders across the district. Whether trust is supposed to lie in the district’s ability to make a decision, communicate that decision or involve school leaders in the decision-making process, there is little evidence of trust throughout the district. School leaders felt this incongruence acutely through several iterations of planning for the reopening schools in the fall and spring. At critical moments in the reopening process, school leaders were either learning key information from the teachers’ union or discovering a shift in previously agreed-upon plans at the same time as the media and the general public. In many instances, school leaders discovered they needed to execute a plan which they had not agreed to, did not have enough information to carry out with integrity, or which did not have the best interest of students and families at heart. Distrust between district leadership and every facet of the community—teachers, school leaders, community members, the unions and families—hinders open dialogue.

This cascading loss of trust ultimately has the biggest impact on students. A lack of transparency and space to discuss issues of concern only pushes these conversations into other spaces. As an example, the school leaders made the decision to write and ultimately release a letter of dissent *after* the date of their formal evaluation deadline. Barth cautions leaders to be cognizant of obstacles to open dialogue: “Undiscussables are subjects sufficiently important that they are talked about frequently but are so laden with anxiety and fearfulness that these conversations take place only in the parking lot, the restrooms, the playground, the car pool, or the dinner table at home” (2002, p.8). The conversations will take place; the solution lies in the district’s ability to broach them through open dialogue. ***BPS can cultivate a trusting environment for school and district leaders by naming the undiscussables and creating a***

space to resolve these concerns. (As an example: Decisions made in the district office which impact the entire district need to be communicated with clarity and with an openness to dialogue . With the recent reorganization, there are a number of employees who shifted roles, due to promotions and demotions. These decisions impact the relationships of staff within the district as well as school leaders.)

The newly revised School Leader Cabinet is composed of select school leaders who are consulted on district issues and asked to share pertinent messages with their respective regions. Rather than brainstorm ideas and co-create policy, these individuals are more often asked to weigh in on decisions that have already been made beforehand. I offer that the district leadership genuinely and actively seek their partnership in decision-making, and provide the support needed to enact initiatives and directives designed to improve student outcomes. Using Bolman and Deal’s framework to map the political terrain, the district leadership should map out the political terrain—across all stakeholder groups—and use this data to formulate a council to provide guidance to the superintendent by using the REPT (Racial Equity Planning Tool) and communicate decisions to their respective constituencies. This council will also serve as a place to name and discuss the undiscussable.



Clarifying Direction

How can the district move toward being an anti-racist, liberatory institution where children reach their potential if the district does not know how to get there, or where “there” actually is? Recommended guidance from the Bellwether report (2019) suggests that the new superintendent “articulate a coherent and focused vision, anchored in a defined set of key priorities, for the future of Boston Public Schools. Without a clear set of targeted priorities, district leaders will get bogged down in trying to address every strategy at once, leading to inefficiency and weak execution” (p. 34).

During interviews I conducted with both school-based and district office staff, I was unable to reach consensus on the question: “From your vantage point, what does the district value and work toward every day?” The responses varied from anti-racist instruction to equity for all, to family engagement and more. As I conclude my residency in March, and as we now approach the end of the 2020–21 school year, BPS has yet to clearly articulate a “North Star” for the district. Earlier this winter the Executive Cabinet reviewed Fullan’s Coherence Framework, which encourages districts to identify a focusing direction: shared purpose-driving action, a small number of goals tied to student learning that drive decisions, a clear strategy for achieving the goals that is known by all, and change knowledge that is used to move the district forward (Fullan 2016, p. 9). I often found myself in meetings asking questions that had already been answered years ago, yet documentation was not readily available or a departed staff member had taken the knowledge with them to a new space. For example, the former Assistant Superintendent of Academic Leadership is an Ed.L.D. alum, as is the former Chief of Schools, who designed a school support structure grounded in a system of teams that focused on schools’ capacity-building. This is the exact same work the Division of Accountability is attempting in its drive towards a coherent system of professional learning, yet access to the previous work is limited or nonexistent. Five years ago former Ed.L.D. Resident Mary Wall wrote, “In BPS, because the district has not clearly defined the north star toward which all

of our efforts gravitate, it becomes harder to make decisions about whether the conditions we are experiencing are the problem we want to tackle or whether they are just components of the ecosystem in which we live. Because of this lack of common orientation around problem, solution, logic, or north star, individuals and teams struggle to understand how they are set up to tackle big problems” (Wall, 2017, p.96).

Bearing that in mind, ***I recommend that BPS clearly identify and articulate a north star and align and clarify the roles of district staff and leadership to enact the vision in support of school leaders and stakeholders.***

Protecting Time and Energy

The greatest impediment to school leaders’ productivity lies outside the walls of their school building. School leaders need to feel safe from intrusion and interruption, both physically and mentally. The mental health of students and adults is at a critical juncture all over our country. School leaders are inundated with requests from the district office on a daily basis, many of them contradictory. One school leader shared: “We have a 72-hour rule in my building. If the directive comes from the district office, we wait 72 hours before acting on it because we are often told to change course, or we receive a contradictory message from another source after the original request” (personal communication, 3/19/2021). If BPS hopes to increase the academic proficiency of all students, then the district must recognize the value and influence school leaders have on teachers’ practice and protect school leaders’ most precious commodities—their time and energy. The district must ensure that school leaders are not consumed by external threats, which limit their productivity in improving teacher practice by providing consistent, measurable feedback and support to school-based staff. Support staff from the district office should be well equipped to put out the fires that school leaders are now having to focus on instead of instructional leadership; doing so will allow school leaders to support

teachers in advancing the anti-racist agenda that BPS says it values through the work of its strategic plan.

In light of what I observed, I recommend ***BPS leadership focus on protecting the time and energy of school leaders and their direct supervisors. This can be achieved through the design of efficient and transparent systems of communication and by shifting to a model of service and support for school leaders and deploying district office staff to school buildings as needed/requested.***

Grounding Through Order

Order is established when there are clear roles, support, and praise for a job well done. A BPS leader wondered: “is our dysfunction a result of our own insecurities or is it a result of an unhealthy system?” It is a combination of both—lack of clarity within roles and lack of acknowledgment.

Over the last ten months, I have had the good fortune of working alongside several talented and committed leaders within the district office, as well as many brilliant school leaders doing good work on behalf of children. Many of these leaders are thriving because they are seeking support from sources outside of the district and from one another in a non-systematized way. Another leader intimated, “You can be average in this district and be considered great.”

According to the DESE report, there needs to be a professional learning plan for all BPS employees to solidify professional development over the course of the next three to five years, so that all BPS staff members have a clear understanding of their role in making BPS an anti-racist district. Where does this work currently find a home within the district? A team has been organized through the Division of Strategy and Equity, yet, after six months of meeting, there is no formalized plan or strategy to execute the DESE mandate. If the district clarifies the roles and identifies the skills and talents of the district office, they will be better positioned to support school leaders and provide high-quality professional learning throughout the district. In

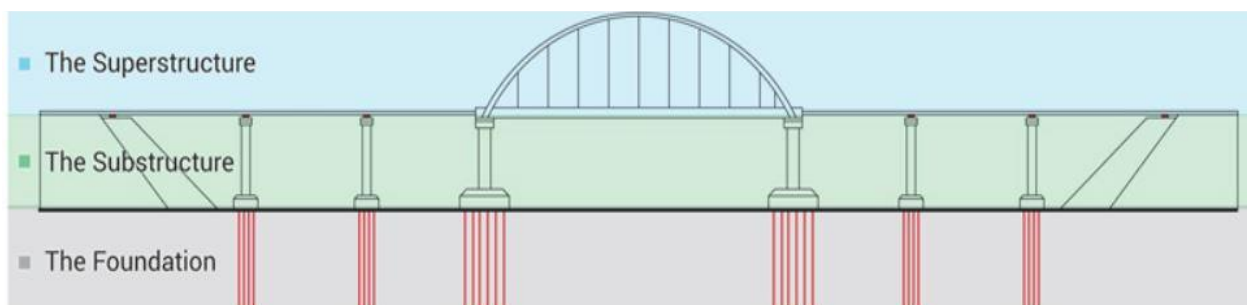
my view, the answers are already in the room. Many individuals have ideas and strategies to execute in filling gaps within the current district structure. ***I recommend that the district leverage the institutional knowledge of the members of the BPS community and create a cross-department professional development network, so that there will be a greater understanding of roles and how they are aligned as well as interdependent.***

Implications for Sector

“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”

—Kenyan Proverb

Having worked in a district for the past 10 months, I can attest that there is much work to be done to shift the trajectory of student achievement and to improve adult learning and development. Yet I also saw the results of sustained efforts by a focused few dedicated to achieving positive outcomes for students. These efforts are not anomalies and can be replicated across the sector, with a systematic focus on student achievement—even in the midst of a crisis. Beginning with the premise that everything within the education sector is not broken, I posit that we need to slow down and make a thorough assessment of what is working (*for all students*) within the sector. Once we identify areas of success, state education departments and the federal government can provide districts with resources to build upon those successes. Across the country, we need to leverage opportunities for districts to learn from one another. Siloed success does not benefit the nation and will continue to exacerbate the growing opportunity and achievement gap. Given the opportunity to implement these suggestions, I believe we will see a continued shift in positive outcomes for students across the nation. I categorized my recommendations based on the three structures which comprise a bridge. We will cross over into a new paradigm once we acknowledge the beauty that exists and the bright future which lies ahead of this season of strife.



Foundation. Everything is not broken. The sector needs to consider what is working before anything else is fixed in the field. Changing the national conversation from an excessive focus on what's broken to highlighting what's working is a start toward using an asset-based approach to address concerns over student outcomes. Constantly hearing negative discourse about their educational outlooks may stymie ambition in some students (Anderson, 2016). According to the U.S. News Best High School rankings, approximately 88% of the nation's students graduate from high school. A 2016 study conducted by the UNCF, the National Urban League and Education post found that 96% of Black parents and grandparents totally agree that education is the civil rights issue of our time (Anderson, 2016). These statistics speak to the imperative of finding avenues of success for all students across the country. For the sake of our children, we must shift the narrative and the focus on the conversation. If the educational sector approached reform through this lens, we would not try to fix everything in the field at once. Fullan reminds us that it takes from 3–6 years to see improved achievement following full implementation of a school or district reform strategy (Fullan, 2016). However, many districts have a revolving door, which prevents strategies from taking root and making an impact on student achievement. How many initiatives across the country have been abandoned due to a change in leadership—whether at the district, state or federal level? With each change in administration, there is a shift in accountability for states, districts, and schools, which results in diversion of the current focus within districts and in schools.

The core of all school reform measures is a reliance upon the actions of teachers within the classroom and the subsequent actions of families (and communities) to support students outside of the school building. Without these critical voices at the table, teachers and families will continue to lose trust in the system. According to Hurley (2009), student engagement is the lynchpin for increased success; we need to move to a point where more of the school-based tasks in which students are engaged actually become their dreams when they leave us at the end of each day. When students and teachers find value in their work and are invested, they are

more likely to find success. Across the country, in the face of the worst crises this country has seen in over a century, teachers and school leaders have leveraged opportunities for innovation *through simplicity* while building relationships with students and families like never before. Through the power of technology, schools have been able to invite students and families to be a part of the decision-making in the classroom. Throughout the 2016–17 school year, former venture capitalist Ted Dintersmith visited schools in all 50 states. He recounts in his findings that a reimagined focus on purpose, essentials, agency and knowledge ought to be the foundation of learning (Dintersmith, 2018). Before anything else is “fixed” on the foundational level, educational leaders should give students, teachers and families the reins and invite them to the reformation/reimagining table. This invitation should be extended by local, state and federal lawmakers and even reformers and philanthropists.

On the federal level, the US House Committee on Education and Labor claims to “ensure that America’s needs are addressed so that students ... may move forward in a changing school system”. According to their website, the Committee oversees federal programs and initiatives dealing with education at all levels—from preschool through high school, higher education and continuing education. While the current Vice-Chair is a former principal from New York City, only 9 of the current 54 members of the Committee have worked in K–12 or higher education (D-Adams, Bowman, Hayes, Omar, Takano, Wilson; R-Foxx, Letlow, Miller). ***The Committee should establish a subcommittee which requires formalized ongoing consultation with current educators and students prior to any decision-making.*** Likewise, on the state and local level, there needs to be a consulting body which consists of current educators and students to offer guidance before legislative decisions are made for K–12 schools.

Substructure. Some organizations point to cross-functional teams as the key to creating breakthrough innovations. At Google, it is common practice for small teams to attack each problem and for employees to influence one another using rational persuasion and data. Time is

allotted for employees to problem-solve and discuss innovations for the company to explore. O'Reilly and Tushman encourage organizations to renew themselves through the creation of breakthrough processes without hampering their traditional business models (2004). One district, Kettle Morain School District, outside of Milwaukee, is focused on personalized and competency-based learning. The school superintendent hosts an annual retreat for board members, district staff and community members to reflect on performance and plan for the future. The district created four charter schools inside of existing schools to pilot innovations. We will continue to get the same results for students if we do not shift our practice. Successful educational leaders develop their districts and schools as effective organizations that support and sustain the performance of administrators and teachers as well as students. However, a clear, coherent district-wide plan must be in place and leaders must leverage multiple data sources to provide targeted interventions for students and adults. We will continue to get the same results for students (and adults) if we do not shift our practices.

Superstructure. Diagnosing a problem in the field of education is a tedious process, one which takes both time and energy—precious commodities impacting the life outcomes of a student. Yet how often do districts take the time to stop and conduct a probe into the problems which ail their schools before applying a solution, which may not adequately address the root cause? And how often do districts lean upon one another to solve their problems, as they arise? As a field, we undervalue the importance of systematic and organized methods of learning to improve. When a pressing problem presents itself, we often jump to implement a policy or programmatic change before fully understanding the exact problem to be solved. We call this phenomenon *solutionitis* (Bryk, 2015 p. 470). It is a form of groupthink in which a set of beliefs crystallizes based on an incomplete analysis of the problem to be addressed and without full consideration of potential problem-solving alternatives. Understanding that all initiatives will not be successful in all settings, districts cannot be afraid to innovate while invigorating their current practices. There is a difference between knowledge that something can work and knowledge of

how to actually make it work reliably across diverse contexts and populations (Bryk, 2015, p.469). I believe there should be an opportunity for districts across the country to collaborate on successful practices and share ideas. An example of this type of collaboration is the Council of the Great City Schools, which has 76 member districts, all of which are connected under the auspices of the Council to share concerns and solutions and discuss what works in boosting achievement and managing operations (Council of the Great City Schools, 2020). Yet there is an opportunity to expand upon their good work and include mid-sized and rural districts in order to include all voices in the solutions of public education.

Implications for Self

When deciding on my residency site placement, I said to myself, “I am curious to see what’s behind the district curtain. I want to meet the Richard Pryor(s) of BPS.” This is a reference to the antagonist of one of my favorite movies, “The Wiz.” In this remake of the classic, *The Wizard of Oz*, the protagonist is on a journey *to find her way back home*. Along the way, she meets three characters who are also searching for tools to edify them on their life’s journey: brains, heart and courage. Although I expressed a desire to discover the mystical and powerful Wiz, I recognize that the most important aspects of the movie is the actual journey itself and the transformation which takes place within each of the characters. Throughout my Ed.L.D. experience and residency journey, I found the need to search within and activate the brains, heart and courage I already possessed to lead me *home*.

During my first year at Harvard, in the Leaders of Learning course, our novice professor, a fellow Ed.L.D. alum, shared a moment of vulnerability with my cohort regarding her apprehension and lack of confidence as the first-year instructor of this pivotal course. Ironically, on the night before the course was to begin, she ran into her predecessor, who shared these words of encouragement. In his book, *I Used to Think ... And Now I Think*, the original professor for the Leaders of Learning course, the late Richard Elmore, highlights our world values, hard ideological boundaries and fixed truths (p.2). I admit that I came into the EdLD program with an open mind—to most topics. However, I did not anticipate the depths to which I would descend regarding my own fixed truths. Completing a semi-virtual residency during the worst onslaught of multiple pandemics caused me to reflect even further on Elmore’s words: “uncertain times ... require flexibility, reflectiveness and agility of mind—qualities of disciplined learning.” The uncertainty of 2020 and beyond has never been more apparent. Unconsciously, I have exercised flexibility, reflectiveness and agility of mind; consciously, I have fought to control the

circumstances around me. This battle of dueling forces was fatiguing and oftentimes unnecessary.

At the conclusion of the course, our professor asked my cohort to grapple with the new knowledge we had gained from the course and consider our previously held beliefs and preconceptions about the subject matter. After several school visits and intense discussions, I recall thinking how substantially different my views on student discipline and “controlling bodies” were after the course, compared to when I was a teacher and principal. This practice was an opportunity for me to make public my thinking and share evidence of my learning. For the purpose of this section, I will reflect on what I used to think and what I now think as a result of the tools I gained on my journey through Boston Public Schools.

The Who In The Room. “If you are the smartest person in the room, you’re in the wrong room.” This quote is attributed to many people, primarily Confucius, the sage of sages. On the surface, the premise of the quote is to surround yourself with people who are smarter than you, yet, underneath the words, I found a deeper and affirming message on this journey.

I used to think ... that being around other smart people made me smarter. While there is some truth to this statement, it is also incomplete. From the age of four, I was in gifted programs or attended specialized schools, which ensured that I was surrounded by smart people. These experiences increased my knowledge base and reinforced my desire to one day be a contestant on *Jeopardy!*, yet they also made me question my intelligence and *entitlement* to be in certain rooms. At home, because of grades and test scores, I allowed seeds of doubt to grow and I questioned my place in the family gene pool. The value that I and others placed on these metrics created an internal message of inadequacy and feelings of not being smart or good enough. In my early youth, I sought to dispel those feelings by charting my own path through music; later, I sought to overcome those feelings by fine tuning my listening skills and emotional intelligence. During my residency, I often referred to myself as a “doctoral resident,” rarely mentioning the school or program. I could hear my professor DJS's voice looming as she

reminded us to be mindful of the big “H” **and** little “h” of humility, and eschew the appearance of boasting or staking a claim to the “smart stick.” This strategic move doubled as a protective measure to allow me the opportunity to listen and learn without being looked to for answers solely based on my affiliation with Harvard.

Now I think ... being the smartest person in the room is subjective and dependent on the topic of discussion *in the room*, simply because we **all** have something to learn from one another. Throughout my residency, I have gained a wealth of knowledge about the systems and structures of **a** district office, mostly because I listened to others and used the knowledge I gained from them to make strategic decisions. I have also been able to offer suggestions, guidance and opinions about improvement to those systems and structures, although I was a novice to the Boston Public Schools district office. I think the smartest room in BPS is one where everyone is valued and appreciated for their unique skills, talents and intelligence, where we are able to challenge our beliefs and preconceptions, where we are able to lovingly speak truth to power and collectively contribute to the growth and advancement of all students, adults and their local communities.

Lead with love. As someone with a predisposition to the ENFP type—the introspective “motivating champion,” “mediating advocate,” and “diplomatic idealist”—I live up to the endearment of my father, “the daughter who never met a stranger.” With approximately 8% of the population falling into this category, I am in the company of Ellen DeGeneres, Robin Williams, George Carlin and Walt Disney, individuals who are unique in their ability to bring joy, laughter and intense emotional experiences to the masses—at times to their own peril.

I used to think ... leading with love was an invitation to share my heart and an invitation for others to share theirs. My experiences in leading with love have allowed me to amass a rolodex of friends and colleagues I can call upon to share my innermost thoughts and seek guidance in tough situations. As an ENFP, my overarching question is: how will this benefit

people and the world **now**? My preoccupation with living with purpose and leaving a legacy behind causes me to jump into action without always considering the minute details.

And now I think ... I can still lead with love **and** respect that it may not be reciprocated or welcomed, and that my good intentions may appear disingenuous to some. To love means to hold dear and display an unselfish concern for the good of another. How can I purport to lead with love and yet hold the expectation that what I believe is good for me is also good for someone else? Each of us has the desire to be held with dignity. While it is not my preference, I can accomplish “the work” without deep relationships, albeit with a shift to my fixed ways of thinking. I have learned to balance a focus on the process with the relationships formed through the work. Through my residency at Boston Public Schools, I have learned to acknowledge the deep-seated distrust that preceded me and to mitigate it by establishing a foundation of trust through the deliberate act of doing the work together. Taking this stance may *or may not* forge a new relationship, and I have made peace with that, as long as the outcome yields equitable opportunities for children and adults to thrive.

Courage to Lead and Learn. During my residency, I entered Zoom rooms where I was ignored, overlooked and disregarded. Naively, I attributed that behavior in response to the moniker of “Resident.” Aside from the title, I often wondered if my personality traits—extraversion, self-confidence and ambition—alienated certain individuals within the organization. Perhaps being perceived as aggressive sent the wrong cue about my intentions, in spite of the special care I take in choosing my words. While perception is a two-way street, I also believe that we tend to make judgments about others based on our previous experiences. I can recall instances during my residency when I made judgments about people and ignored, overlooked and disregarded them. This behavior was not a sign of my courage to step into difficult conversations, nor was it a sign of my courage to take a risk and speak up when I thought a decision or comment was harmful to children (and other adults).

I used to think ... courage meant taking the first step—risking failure, ridicule and defeat. I believed courage to mean acting in the face of fear. I would characterize myself as a risk-taker, as would most people who *truly* know me. I found that the risks I was willing to take during the residency were more calculated than they were brave.

And now I think ... being courageous does not mean risking it all. A school leader shared, “You cannot have courage at the expense of trust” (personal communication, 3/25/2021). I interpret that to mean: there is a chance that trust will be broken when courage is displayed without wisdom. Oftentimes the most courageous thing I can do is to be quiet, listen and observe, and choose the moments to confidently raise my voice so that it will have the intended impact. “Vulnerability is about having the courage to show up and be seen” (Brené Brown, 2013). To paraphrase Richard Elmore, my courage and confidence was bound up with my prior success, and so I struggled, until I became a learner (Shannon & Gutierrez, 2021). I have learned a great deal about myself and the courage it takes to keep learning and discovering.

Conclusion

“Leadership is a practice not a position (of authority).”
Ron Heifetz

Boston Public Schools is brimming with talented, courageous and compassionate adults—both within schools and within the district office. Over the last ten months, I have witnessed heroic efforts to ensure that students are cared for emotionally, physically and academically, and given the necessary tools to become independent self-directed learners.

This capstone concludes with a reflection from the introduction: Leadership Matters. In order to thrive, Boston Public Schools must ensure that all levels of leadership operate in a consistent manner in their support of school leaders and that they embody consistency with the three facets of Frey’s triangle. Ultimately, the practice of leadership is most effective when the conditions are conducive for everyone to thrive.

With the increase in Americans receiving the COVID-19 vaccine and the dawn of a new era in our national leadership, we see a nation becoming incrementally healthier and circumspectly committing to live out its creed: that “all men and women are created equal.” People are rallying against the systemic oppression of COVID-19 and anti-Asian hate which still takes place across the country. These are promising signs that we will one day “return to normal.” It is my hope that Boston Public Schools will reclaim its place high amid the national landscape as a trailblazer in education. School leaders need to know that there is life after so much death.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Letters to Families from Dr. Cassellius, May 1, 2020



Office of the Superintendent
Dr. Brenda Cassellius
2300 Washington Street
Roxbury, Massachusetts 02119

May 1, 2020

Dear Boston Public Schools Community,

I hope you and your loved ones are safe and healthy.

Since Governor Baker announced that all Massachusetts schools will remain closed through this academic year, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Commissioner Jeffrey Riley recently released guidance to schools, underscoring that student learning will continue, while keeping health and safety as our top priority. We understand that this is a challenging time for all of us as we balance work, home life, caring for loved ones, and the education of our children while also working to remain safe during this health crisis.

We know students are missing their classmates, teachers, and countless meaningful events. We miss them too. While we can't recreate the full classroom experience during this school closure, we can provide enriching learning opportunities and connections for our students.

We are prepared to meet the unique needs of our students to continue their learning and provide support to our families. Our team has been working hard to develop plans and collaborating with school leaders to ensure students have access to learning opportunities for the rest of this school year.

The following will be in effect on Monday, May 4 through the end of the school year in June.

Schedule: Every school will share a class schedule with families and students.

Attendance: Teachers will record daily attendance each week. Attendance includes completing learning activities or interaction with teachers/staff. Teachers in grades K0-5 will record daily attendance. Teachers in grades 6-12 will record daily attendance by course.

Grading: Students will receive grades and feedback on their assigned projects and tasks. Elementary students (grades K0-5) will receive a term 3 grade of Meets Expectations, Approaching Expectations, or Not Yet Meeting Expectations. Secondary students (grades 6-12) will receive a Term 3 letter grade if it is above their average grade from Terms 1 and 2. Otherwise, secondary students will earn a grade of Pass or Incomplete and that grade will not be factored into their final grade.

Advancing to the Next Grade: No student will be held back in their grade. All students will advance to the next grade and will have opportunities for summer learning and additional support in the fall. If parents believe their child would benefit from repeating their grade, they can request a meeting with their teacher.

Access to teachers: Each school schedule will include class times, and a school staff member will contact each student at least every three days.

Boston Public Schools
Brenda Cassellius, Superintendent

Boston School Committee
Michael Loconto, Chair

City of Boston
Martin J. Walsh, Mayor



Students with disabilities: Students will receive services that can reasonably be provided in a remote learning environment by their assigned team of educators in relation to the goals identified in the student's IEP.

English Learners: Students will receive ESL instruction based on their English Development Level.

Graduation: Graduation is a celebration of students, their families, and their school communities. We are working on several opportunities to celebrate this year's graduations citywide and with each school. We look forward to sharing more information soon.

We will continue to assess and shift how we meet our students' needs during this unprecedented closure based on feedback. My team and I have convened weekly Equity Roundtables to hear from educators, parents, social service providers, and community partners to gather real-time feedback and identify challenges so we can direct resources to support students and families who need them.

We are so grateful to our teachers, food workers, technology staff, and other frontline workers who are working tirelessly to get our children what they need to learn and stay healthy. We care deeply for our students and families and look forward to continuing to build meaningful connections with all of you as we close out our school year over the next several weeks. If you have any questions about this information please contact your school principal.

Please continue to practice social distancing, wear a face covering when you have to leave home, and wash your hands frequently. You can find more information for resources to food, technology, learning at home, and more at bostonpublicschools.org/coronavirus

I am certain we will only grow stronger and better every day. We are here to support you and we will get through this together as a community.

Be well and be safe.



Brenda Cassellius
Superintendent



Appendix B

Boston Public Schools - Partnerships



BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIP

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

School vision and goals drive the selection and creation of partnerships. The school community helps determine school partnerships. Partners understand their role to help advance the school's larger vision while meeting the goals and needs of the school community.

SHARED ACCOUNTABILITY

School and partners mutually establish shared goals, clear expectations, roles and responsibilities and other key conditions for partnership success. School and partners share ownership for accomplishments and challenges, make joint-decisions and collaboratively engage in trouble-shooting.

RESULTS DRIVEN

Partnerships have measurable outcomes related to the priorities of school goals. Schools and partners regularly assess progress towards stated outcomes, and adjust partnership implementation strategies as needed.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

There is a formal system and structure in place for regular, two-way communication between partners and school staff involved in the work. Regular feedback mechanisms between the school and the partner are in place to discuss the degree to which the partnership is working or not working. School and partner communication regarding decisions are transparent and proactive.

COORDINATED SERVICES

School and partners collaborate regularly with each other to coordinate use of site facilities and resources, and exchange information and ideas about programming. School has a process in place to ensure that its staff and partners are able to refer students to partner services that are best able to meet their individual needs. Partners know other school partners well to avoid duplicating services in order to act more efficiently.

Boston Public Schools
Dr. Brenda Cassellus, Superintendent

Boston School Committee
Michael Locanto, Chair

City of Boston
Martin J. Walsh, Mayor



Updated January 25, 2019

Appendix C

Reopening Task Force Correspondence

BPS Reopening Task Force

As part of the planning for the reopening of school this fall we have established several Reopening Task Force teams. In alignment with the Academic Department's Equitable Recovery workstream, these teams will provide insight and feedback from the school-based staff perspective. The Reopening Task Force teams will be responsible for addressing project areas specifically identified by the Steering Committee and Executive Team. The Reopening Task Force teams will serve as an additional feedback loop to the numerous planning teams as we finalize the implementation of the BPS reopening plan.

Please select a team to contribute your time and talent.

* Required

Email address *

Your email

Full Name *

Your answer

School Affiliation *

Your answer

Select the Task Force Team you would like to contribute your time/talent.
(Topic/Lead - Initial Meeting Date, Time) *

- English Learners/Elia - 7/23, 11:00-12:30
- Special Education/Lindsa - 7/23, 2:00-3:30
- Professional Learning/Mary and Natalie - 7/23, 11 am - 12pm
- SEL-WELL/Tommy - 7/24, 10:30am - 12pm
- Technology Tools-Assessment/Marjorie - 7/23, 1:30pm-3pm
- Family Access to Learning/Ana - Dates TBD
- Best Practices for Digital-Remote Learning/Mary and Natalie - 7/23, 2pm - 3pm
- Elementary and Secondary School Plans/Grace - Dates TBD

Dear K8 Association and Heads of School Association and Staff,

As part of the planning for the reopening of school this fall the Executive Team has established several Reopening Task Force teams. In alignment with the Academic Department's Equitable Recovery workstream, these teams will provide insight and feedback from the school-based staff perspective. The Reopening Task Force teams will be responsible for addressing project areas specifically identified by the Equitable Recovery Team and Executive Team. The Reopening Task Force teams will serve as an additional feedback loop to the numerous planning teams, and the project areas will become a part of the Academic Department's Equitable Recovery plan. Primary goals of the members of each team will be thinking through what needs to be considered, who needs to be involved, what communication needs to happen, and what the best course of action would be for implementation. The Reopening Task Force teams will report their recommendations and feedback back to the Equitable Recovery Team on a weekly basis through mid-August.

Connection between the Equitable Recovery Team and the Reopening Task Force Teams

- The Equitable Recovery Team and Reopening Task Force teams will operate independently of one another. The Reopening Task Force teams will suggest best practices and/or provide strategic advice on the project areas identified by the Equitable Recovery Team. There will be a specific focus on the best ways to implement successful reopening strategies and making recommendations to the Equitable Recovery Team for inclusion in the overall planning process.
- Reopening Task Force team leads (designated School Superintendents) will be responsible for:
 - preparing and sharing an agenda in advance of the meeting
 - ensuring notes are taken from each session, sharing notes with the Equitable Recovery Team
 - providing a 15-minute update to the Equitable Recovery Team.
- The Equitable Recovery Team will be responsible for making sure Reopening Task Force leads have access to the necessary key information in order to lead the weekly session.

Meeting Schedule/Time Expectations:

- July: once/week x 1-1.5 hours- Focused on Plan Development
 - Week of July 20 (one 30 to 90-minute meeting)
 - Week of July 27 (one 60 to 90--minute meeting)
- August: once/week x 1-1.5 hours- Focused on Successful Implementation of Assigned Project Area
 - Week of August 3 (one 60-minute meeting)
 - Week of August 10 (one 90-minute meeting)

Group Membership:

- Executive Team Member
- Up to 5 teachers/staff members
- Up to 2 school leaders (preferably one K8 and one HS)
- Any other central office staff members invited for the topics being discussed
- By utilizing the Racial Equity Planning Tool, we will ensure a diverse racial representation, as well as geographic, grade-level, experience, and other factors of diversity are prioritized among developing the membership Reopening Task Force teams.

The immediate ask:

Please share this [Google Form](#) with your membership to solicit interest in participating on one of these Reopening Task Force teams (you will have access to view of the survey responses for your reference). The

School Superintendent team will reach out to the association leads to confirm the two school leader participants and alternate by Wednesday. Initial Reopening Task Force meetings are scheduled as follows:

- English Learners Task Force Meeting: 7/23, 11:00-12:30
- Professional Learning Task Force Meeting: 7/23, 11:00-12:00
- Best Practices for Digital/Remote Learning Meeting: 7/23, 2:00-3:00
- Special Education Task Force Meeting: 7/23, 2:00-3:30
- Social Emotional Learning and Wellness: 7/24, 11:30-12:00
- Technology Tools/Data & Assessment: 7/23, 1:30pm-3pm
- Family Access to Learning:
- Elementary and Secondary School Plans: TBD (drafting the reopening plan)

We understand this ask has an extremely short turnaround, time and many of the school leaders are enjoying their break or either working with their teams to strategize around school opening. However, in alignment with Commitment 3 of the Strategic Plan ("Amplify All Voices"), the Executive Team values the feedback from our leaders and teachers as we shape the BPS reopening strategy. Please respond to the embedded survey by Tuesday, July 21 at 7pm. Participants will be contacted by the Reopening Task Force leads by Wednesday, 7/22, and initial meetings will be held by the end of the week.

Thank you,
Elia, Lindsa, Natalie, Mary, Ana, Marjorie, Grace, and Tommy

Task Force focus/lead	Lead	Initial meeting: Week of 7/20	Week of 7/27	Week of 8/3	Week of 8/10
English Learners	Elia and Lindsa	7/23 11:00-12:30	7/28 11:00-12:00	8/4 11:00-12:00	8/11 11:00-12:00
Special Education	Lindsa and Elia	7/23 2:00-3:30	7/28 2:00-3:00	8/4 2:00-3:00	8/11 2:00-3:00
Professional Learning	Mary and Natalie	7/23 11-12:00	7/28 11:00-12:00	8/4 10:00-11:00	8/11 10:00-11:00
SEL/WELL	Tommy	7/24 11:30-12	7/30 12:30-2:00	8/6 1-2:00	8/13 1-2:30
Technology Tools/Data & Assessment	Marjorie	7/23 1:30-3:00pm	7/29 9:30-11am	8/5 9:30-11am	8/12 9:30-11am
Family Access to Learning	Ana	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD
Best Practices for Digital/Remote Learning	Mary and Natalie	7/23 2-3:00	7/28 2:00-3:00	8/4 2:00-3:00	8/11 11:30-12:30
Elementary and Secondary School Plans	Grace	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD

Appendix D

PLC Launch Success - PLC Leads and PLC Planning Team

What does success look like on Thursday, October 29, 2020?

<p>██████</p>	<p>PLC members leave feeling energized, clear on our why and purpose/ direction, as well as challenged. Success looks like a deep understanding of the urgency behind our instructional leadership and its impact on/ role in anti-racist leadership, as well as (the beginning of) an aligned understanding of a Standard of Excellence for Remote Instruction and a brief opportunity to practice analyzing remote instruction through that lens.</p>
<p>██████</p>	<p>Leader engagement and interest in the work. An ability to grapple with the work and being able to put aside the stuff that is in the front of their mind (Covid, Racial Equity, Election...) Be able to reflect on their own schools with an eye towards improvement and innovation.</p>
<p>██████</p>	<p>Principals in this squad will have a space to deeply reflect, learn about external research on DL work, and see where we have intersection in our learning from other PLC's, and where we have to do some learning/advocacy for our schools. They will all have clarity on our Arc of Learning, and opportunity to contribute to the path of learning for the year.</p>
<p>██████</p>	<p>Participants will feel connected as a professional cohort with a shared set of goals and with clear guidance on where to take next steps, grounded in a shared text and activities. Participants will be more informed about how we apply our anti racist educator practices to a "system" of support.</p>
<p>██████</p>	<p>School Leaders leave with a clear understanding of the Arc of learning for our PLC with strong connections to district's anti-racist commitment and have a clear now, next, later.</p>
<p>██████</p>	<p>School leaders have the opportunity to co-create a learning space to first assess themselves, their practice and their school context before learning things that will help move their schools towards greater performance in terms of CLSP and affirmation of the identities of their students and teachers. We want PLC space to be a place where leaders can reflect and engage in productive struggle around ideas, get feedback and consultation from their peers on the plans they are putting in place to move their schools forward. We hope to offer engaging, cognitively demanding activities but also holding space for leaders to learn and reflect. We want leaders to engage in partnership and collaboration in the work and to build consistency across schools.</p>
<p>██████</p>	<p>All PLC leaders will launch with equity and strong adult relationships as we dig deeper into our work. Leaders will leave each PLC Thursday afternoon feeling connected to colleagues and prepared to apply their learning to their own leadership and school community to better impact instruction and student learning</p>
<p>██████</p>	<p>Each PLC launches with an inspiring, collaborative, content-rich session, in which equity is the clear lens through which we are approaching teaching and learning, for ourselves and our students. Participants feel connected to the work and to each other. There is a clear arc of learning presented, that shows a deep belief in the intellectual genius of principal participants, teachers and students, and families.</p>
<p>██████</p>	<p>Overall, I hope that participants have the opportunity to connect, grapple, reflect and apply new learning to their school context in explicit and meaningful ways that directly impact student thinking and learning and foster students' intellectual identity. I hope they have a sense of connection, experience genuine collaboration, some healthy cognitive chaos and a sense of self efficacy that they CAN do this work in their school communities. Specifically my goals for them on Thursday are to begin to build relationships as colleagues and thought partners in this work, deepen their understanding of critical consciousness as informed by the work and thinking of specific scholars, begin to reflect on it's intersectionality with the culture of learning and thinking in their school and understand the arc of learning for the year.</p>

<p>██████</p>	<p>Success looks like collaborating for coherence in developing an arc of learning that will support the unique profiles of our high schools, considering Pilot schools, open enrollment schools, transformation schools and exam schools. How are we the same and how are we different? What challenges can we mitigate to create oneness in our purpose, considering the role of assessment, school enrollment processes and systems of supports. This is all relevant to HS Redesign as we set out to lessen the transitions of our BPS students as they matriculate through school. In addition it involves a 7-12 redesign of seven of our open enrollment schools. We will consider increasing rigor and decreasing disproportionality in opportunities. This includes adding more AP, CTE pathways, early college support and dual enrollment. Also IB for all of our open enrollment schools.</p>
<p>██████</p>	<p>Clear through line around equity, sense of collaboration and spirit of togetherness, grounding in our kids and finding hope in this and walking away with knowing or being able to something new for students and families.</p>
<p>██████</p>	<p>A clear understanding of the principles of our outcomes and that in spite of our current state of affairs grounding ourselves in the “why” this work is so important for our students. I walked away from my two previous sessions feeling empowered and supported and I want to replicate that for this team.</p>
<p>██████</p>	<p>Thursday success = All PLC members will understand the scope and sequence of the learning that will unfold throughout the year, make connections to the overarching learning of “All School Leader” PD, and align their work with the strategic vision of BPS. School leaders’ input will be valued and respected at all levels of this learning structure (planning, participation, and follow-up), and all school leaders will serve as facilitators and stewards of learning.</p>

Appendix E

StrengthsFinder Assessment

- **Activator** - People talented in this theme can make things happen by turning thoughts into action. They want to do things now, rather than simply talk about them. We take charge, speak up and make sure others are heard. We know that we will be judged not by what we say, not by what we think, but by what we get done. This does not frighten us. It pleases us.
- **Woo** - People talented in this theme love the challenge of meeting new people and winning them over. They derive satisfaction from breaking the ice and making a connection with someone. Strangers are rarely intimidating to us. In our world there are no strangers, only friends we haven't met yet -- lots of them.
- **Positivity** - People talented in this theme have contagious enthusiasm. They are upbeat and can get others excited about what they are going to do. We build strong relationships that hold a team together and make it greater than the sum of its parts.
- **Empathy** - People talented in this theme can sense other people's feelings by imagining themselves in others' lives or situations. We hear the unvoiced questions. We anticipate the need. Where others grapple for words, we seem to find the right words and the right tone. We help people find the right phrases to express their feelings -- to themselves as well as to others. We help them give voice to their emotional life. For all these reasons other people are drawn to us.
- **Developer** - People talented in this theme recognize and cultivate the potential in others. They spot the signs of each small improvement and derive satisfaction from evidence of progress. Signs of growth in others are your fuel. They bring us strength and satisfaction. Over time many will seek us out for help and encouragement because on some level they know that our helpfulness is both genuine and fulfilling to us.

Appendix F

Email correspondence from PLC Leads

[REDACTED]@bostonpublicschools.org> [REDACTED] ☆ ↩
to me ▾
[REDACTED] you have been so kind and kind! Know that I do appreciate it. [REDACTED] and about to dive into this next PLC.
I would like to get some assist with questions to guide Us through our next reading. I will share and would appreciate you helping me to scaffold the conversation.
[REDACTED] and I will share the article!

On Sun, Jan 24, 2021 at 8:44 PM Shahara C. Jackson <sjackson8@bostonpublicschools.org> wrote:

[REDACTED]
I hope you're managing well. I know the reopening plans have been a heavy lift for school leaders. I'm here to support, as you need.

I shared that Corey is aware of the conflict with the 10:30am school leader call. It will be rescheduled and not conflict with PLCs.

PLCs are scheduled from 9-12p and 1-2:30p with a one hour lunch break. There shouldn't be any other conflicts for your PLC to go forth.

Have you met with Jenne? Do you need support with modifying the session content? Please know that you have support and you're not in this alone.

Take gentle care.

Peace.

Shahara

Sent from scj on the go

[Redacted]

[Redacted]



to me ▾

Thanks so much for your thoughtful message. It definitely resonates with me.

I think I have my objectives and zoom link posted but if you need anything else from me, don't hesitate to let me know. I met with Jenne on MLK Day :)



On Fri, Jan 22, 2021 at 6:24 PM Jackson, Shahara Camille <sjackson8@bostonpublicschools.org> wrote:

Greetings PLC Leads!

As you enter into the weekend, I wanted to send a note of gratitude for the seemingly masterful way in which you have poured into your PLCs as you manage your school buildings, competing tasks and responsibilities, staff and families - in addition to your own personal lives.

Last night I attended a session for residential staff on Grief and Loss During the Pandemic. (For those who aren't aware, I live on campus and I am responsible for an amazing group of first-year students.) I became aware of the term, "Ambiguous Loss/Grief", which means losing a loved one without closure of clear understanding. This type of loss can leave someone searching for answers, and results in unresolved grief - often complicating and/or delaying the process of grieving. This can range from being ghosted, to kidnapping, and catastrophic calamity such as a war or burying someone during a pandemic and not being able to hug one another or see a loved one take their last breath.

I share this because I recognize that, in some sense, we may all be experiencing ambiguous loss and grief, or are adjacent to someone who is. With that understanding, I am prone to lean deeper into a space of grace and love when interacting with others. I do not want to overwhelm you with unnecessary email updates, **nor** do I want to leave you with unanswered questions. This is my way of saying, "I am here. If you need anything, please let me know. If you are not receiving what you need, please provide that feedback as well."



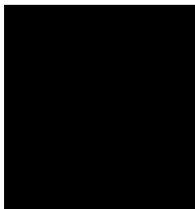
[Redacted]

[Redacted]



to me ▾

Seriously though, leaders are really struggling right now between budgets, evals, reopening and general anxst. Your support is so appreciated!



On Sun, Jan 24, 2021 at 1:30 PM Shahara C. Jackson <sjackson8@bostonpublicschools.org> wrote:

Happy Sunday [Redacted]

Thank YOU for your leadership and grace.

I have everything I need from you, and if there's anything you need from me, please reach out.

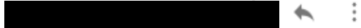
Enjoy your Sunday afternoon!

Peace.
Shahara

Sent from scj on the go



Jackson, Shahara Camille <sjackson8@bostonpublicschools.org>



Thank you for sharing this with [redacted]

Your sentiment is valid, and often it is grossly understated and underemphasized. The concept of Maslow and Bloom working in tandem applies to the school leaders as well. We acknowledge the load that you all are carrying is heavy, and seemingly unbearable. The offer of support is available to you, inclusive of a listening ear and supportive shoulder.

How can we support you two personally - in the moment on this PLC day?

Take gentle care.

Peace.

Shahara



[redacted] <[redacted]@bostonpublicschools.org> wrote:

Just wanted to give a heads up that several school leaders have reached out expressing concern over school leader workload and sustainability. I'll also include myself in these sentiments. Letting y'all know because the majority of the message stem from participants of our PLC who are struggling to make time to invest in their own PD while juggling the demands of running their building, keeping up with new expectations, being short staffed and attending district meetings. No response needed. I'm sharing this in case the information is helpful as you plan with other district + school leaders for the remainder of the school year.

Thank you team,



Fri, Mar 19, 8:57 PM (2 days ago) ☆ ↩

to me ▾

I appreciate your kind words more than you know. Hopefully, I'll get a chance to work with you again in the near future.

Have a great weekend.



[REDACTED]
to me ▾

Hi Shahara,

Thank you for your very kind words! We truly enjoyed your visit today. I'm glad you were able to see and feel the spirit of the [REDACTED] community. It's what drives me every day.

I appreciate you taking the time to learn about the dynamics of our school and look forward to being a thought partner in the future.

You are always welcome at the [REDACTED] and feel free to reach out if ever you need anything or just want historical context about our journey.

Have a great well deserved weekend!

Take care,
[REDACTED]



Jackson, Shahara Camille <sjackson8@bostonpublicschools.org>

We're STILL in the middle of the worst health crisis of our lifetime, AND it is raging with no "clear end" in sight. Give yourself a huge dose of grace knowing that you are giving you ALL, and that will be sufficient.

Healthy Hugs!!!



[REDACTED]@bostonpublicschools.org> wrote:

.) That's just made me cry. I'm stepping outside for 5 :)



[REDACTED] Jackson, Shahara Camille <sjackson8@bostonpublicschools.org> wrote:

ABSOLUTELY NO WORRIES or apologies necessary ... I am shouting with a tight hug. **STOP what you're doing in this moment and take 30 seconds to breathe deeply.** Breathe! There is A LOT on your plate ... be gentle with yourself.

Peace.

[REDACTED]@bostonpublicschools.org> wrote:

Sorry Shahara. I'm super scattered today. I think I have my hand in too many hats and I'm starting to get confused. Please ignore my nonsense. I appreciate you!