



Context Matters: Equitable School Improvement Is a Work of ART

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Context Matters: Equitable School Improvement is a Work of ART

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

Submitted by
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To the Harvard Graduate School of Education
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education Leadership.

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Dedication

To my ancestors. I stand on your shoulders and study in the buildings and halls that you painstakingly built. The fruits of your literal blood, sweat and tears are never lost on me.

To my grandmothers, ***Doris Jean and Margaret Ann***. You are the blueprints. Thank you for being ever encouraging and unwavering in your commitment to answering my 4:00 a.m. phone calls. Your stories and quotes are my most prized possessions.

To my parents, ***Dwain and Linda Vinyard***. Thank you for teaching me resilience, persistence and to dream without boundaries. Through my many transitions and wild ventures, I thank you for never telling me I'm crazy to my face.

To my siblings, ***Karl, Kelly and Brandon***. We took this first-generation thing to a new level! Thank you for the group chats full of laughs and all the personal and professional advice. I am grateful to have you as my advisory cabinet.

To my children, ***Kori and Kensleigh***. I hope that one day you will read these ideas and know that Mommy was committed to making the world a better place for you. Thank you for your grace and patience on this journey. I pray that you thrive!

To my partner in life and in changing the world, ***Kevin Bryant***. Thank you for bringing your whole self to this experience. Thank you for being my thought partner and choosing, yet again, to learn alongside me.

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. . .to the New York City Department of Education Chancellor, **Mr. Richard Carranza**, Chief of Staff **Ms. Edie Sharp** and Deputy Chief of Staff **Dr. Mary Wall**, thank you for your mentorship. I have learned so much from the experiences you provided. Thank you.

. . .to my colleagues in the **Office of the First Deputy Chancellor**. The events over the course of my 10-month residency have made you all my family. We have welcomed new staff members, and we have watched some move on to new things. We created systems and made an impact. Thank you all for your guidance, inspiration and assurance that the children of New York City are in excellent hands.

. . .to the **Academic Response Teams** in New York City. Thank you for taking this ride with me. I am eternally grateful for your willingness to try new things and for your passionate care of children.

. . . to the many family, colleagues and friends at the NYCDOE and throughout the New York City education landscape. Thank you for holding me up and for always being my personal Board of Directors.

“You write in order to change the world . . . if you alter, even by a millimeter, the way people look at reality, then you can change it.” - James Baldwin

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Abstract

When he was named New York City schools Chancellor in 2018, Richard Carranza promised to advance equity for the city's 1.1M students. Shortly thereafter, despite substantial budget cuts at City Hall, his First Deputy Chancellor, Cheryl Watson-Harris, secured \$10M to launch Academic Response Teams.

Academic Response Teams represented a fundamental shift from a one-size-fits-all school support model to one that is focused on co-constructing unique supports with individual school communities. Academic Response Teams serve as a vehicle in the quest to deliver on equity promises through deliberate, contextually driven actions. Providing contextually-fit school improvement support is a unique challenge for a mature, bureaucratic organization that serves an enormous variety of students across a myriad of demographic and socioeconomic markers.

In the 2019-2020 school year, I was charged with engineering, erecting and launching Academic Response Teams. Academic Response Teams serviced nearly 140 schools and approximately 80,000 students throughout all five boroughs. All reforms vary in their success, but herein is an attempt to answer whether a reform is more successful when it is aligned to the aspirations of local communities. It also explores the barriers that such a reform encounters.

Nested in the Office of the First Deputy Chancellor, Academic Response Teams *Advance Equity Now* using improvement science and school-level context as the driver for the design of school support. However, this reform is not disentangled from the history and cadence of change in the New York City Department of Education, because all change sits atop other institutional knowledge. While there are changes in infrastructure or processes,

there remain organizational memories, routines and habits throughout the organization.

What leadership actions are necessary to orient teams toward equity-centered change?

This capstone elevates the learnings, themes and lessons that emerged when New York City Public schools used local context to drive school support.

Introduction

The headline read, “*Wealthy White Manhattan Parents Angrily Rant Against Plan to Bring More Black Kids to Their Schools.*” ([Reed, n.d.](#)) On April 25, 2018, it became clear that Chancellor Richard Carranza would be a provocative change agent in the New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE). In his first few months on the job, Carranza publicly doubled down on Mayor de Blasio’s *Equity and Excellence* agenda by elevating the realities of racial segregation and disproportionality throughout New York City public schools. Chancellor Carranza concretized the Equity and Excellence agenda in national headlines when he began actively attempting to dismantle specialized high school entrance exams; however, this was simply the beginning of yet another change process for the NYC DOE.

The NYC DOE has undergone remarkable change over the last two decades. Much of the foundation and impetus for Chancellor Carranza’s agenda brewed deep in the belly of New York City public schools before his arrival. In 2014, the same year that Mayor Bill de Blasio took office, New York City Schools was infamously named the most segregated school system in America ([Kucsera, 2014](#)). “Two out of five Black students and nearly one out of three Latino students attend(ed) apartheid schools - schools where 99-100% of the student enrollment is minority students([Kucsera, 2014](#)).” For many of the 1.1 million students in the NYC DOE, this fact could go unnoticed. However, Chancellor Carranza and his administration have relentlessly elevated the stark differences in school facilities, teacher quality, resource allocation and overall opportunity that were noted in a 2009 report by the Schott Foundation for Public Education ([*A Rotting Apple: Education Redlining in New York City*](#) | [Schott Foundation for Public Education, n.d.](#)).

While these differences are vital to the discussion, herein, there are additional elements that further complicate the context. Black and Latino students account for 72% of students in New York City, and the majority of these students attend schools where the racial majority is both non-white and low-income. Such “double-segregation” makes the educational environment of these students even more complicated. Black and Latino students in New York City are more likely to experience less qualified, inexperienced, transient teachers, less stability in the teaching force, less successful peers, under-resourcing and inadequate facilities ([Kucsera, 2014](#)). These characteristics are not germane to the Carranza administration and date back to the inception of New York City public schools.

Chancellor Carranza’s administration has been mobilizing resources to create equitable schools, thus creating a high demand for equity experts and consultants. Such experts promise that courageous conversations about whiteness, self-identity and pervasive inequity will deliver more positive classroom learning experiences for Black and Latino students. The demand for equity consultants is evidence that the sector recognizes the impact of its collective inattention to the academic needs of minoritized students and their communities. Conversations and stories about how humans experience oppression and inequity can undoubtedly change the hearts and minds of adults who shape educational policy, classrooms and curriculum. Nevertheless, equity conversations remain an insufficient means to move the proverbial needle for Black and Latino students sitting in classrooms plagued with widening opportunity and achievement gaps. This is because what has existed in our nation during virtually all of its history is a social system that has guaranteed privilege to specific cultural groups, but has oppressed others. Every facet of the social system has produced a society that privileged and oppressed experience differently. Education is merely one facet of that complex social system (Hillard, 1995).

Even if our collective effort to achieve equitable schools were united ideologically, there would remain the question of *how we change the behaviors of the system (and those within it) to align with our ideals more closely*. Therefore, operationalizing the equity conversation through a clear strategy that incorporates variability in context is the key to improving outcomes for Black and Latino children.

Operationalization of equity in schools and school systems refers to purposeful and deliberate action taken to decrease inequity. Such strategy and action are characterized by its ability to be mobilized and operate dynamically within current complexities of system-level context. Operationalization requires the triangulation of three common viewpoints: (1) how equity issues are perceived, (2) how inequity is experienced, and (3) the intricacies of equity in practice at the system and local level. Often seemingly impenetrable structures in school systems create the conundrum of operationalizing equity, surfacing some of the themes discussed throughout this capstone.

As Special Assistant to the First Deputy Chancellor, I was charged with driving change in the Office of the First Deputy Chancellor (OFDC). Similar to the Chief of Schools office in most school districts, OFDC takes action on behalf of programmatic offices in the agency. Therefore, this unit has significant power, influence and is the hub for the implementation. The OFDC serves as an optimal place from which one could *Advance Equity Now*. During residency, I was able to attempt operationalizing of equity because of my position, access and opportunities afforded to me by the First Deputy Chancellor .

An opportunity surfaced within my first month of doctoral residency. On July 3, 2019, the Senior Director of Continuous School Improvement resigned. The First Deputy Chancellor used this departure as a moment to reorganize the Senior Director's office. During this reorganization, we focused on clarifying workstreams, clustering similar work

and activating the new Comprehensive School Support Strategy. The reorganization also served as a unique and timely chance to land on a strategic project that would be impactful for the central, district, and school-level leadership - at scale, in all five boroughs, in many types of communities.

As a resident, I was charged with developing Academic Response Teams (ART). ART is a multi-disciplinary network of experienced educators who provide intensive, context-specific, hands-on coaching of principals, school leadership, teacher-leaders and other instructional staff to improve professional practice and accelerate student learning aligned to goals stated by school-level leadership. ART provide on-site support to schools in cycles that typically last 6-8 weeks. Cycles focus on school-level capacity-building through a gradual release model that leaves school teams to implement a post-support sustainability plan that is monitored by the ART, principal and superintendent.

ART as an equity initiative arose as a solution when an analysis of equity indicators illuminated significant disproportionality in schools that were not state identified. The Senior Executive Director's departure allowed me to seize an opportunity to envision the possibilities for the inaugural ART as the collision of traditional improvement science with equity-based principles that center local context. ART served as a beta test for a school improvement model. This model centers contextualization to operationalize equity ideals and improve how leaders and students experience schools. Engineering ART, as an element of the Comprehensive School Support Strategy, proved that the largest and most complex school system in the country could *Advance Equity Now* for schools, with specific attention to elements that community-based staff deemed necessary. Additionally, ART showed that while systems and structures change, work habits, behaviors and routines in human parts of the system are persistent and not always aligned to the change sought.

Given the incredible complexity of the NYC DOE, many theories and ideas apply to the strategic project. However, this capstone focuses on broad ideas that seem most critical to the replication or continuation of ART and to operationalizing equity in context – *strategy, contextual-fit and unlearning*.

There are two core arguments in this capstone. First, all change overlays other known information within both the individual and the organization. Thus, change efforts require intentional unlearning and an explicit statement of actions and activities aligned to a strategy. Unlearning is especially necessary for equity efforts because there are often deeply held individual beliefs about privilege, marginalization and access. Thus, when an equity-focused strategy is incomplete, incoherent or unclear often obsolete and retractive behaviors seep into the change process; thereby reorienting actions toward the status quo. In other words, “the way people have always done it” makes change difficult in a mature, information-driven organization. Those who have a significant history in an organization generally lack the incentive to change when old behaviors are celebrated or go uncorrected. However, the chances for change taking hold increases when people are brought in from outside of the organization because they often do not require significant unlearning and can more easily disrupt normalized inefficient behaviors.

The second core argument in this capstone is that context matters and should serve as the driver for any intervention or support mechanism. A complete articulation of this argument requires that I provide a meaning for the word context as it used throughout this text. Context is the circumstances that form the setting for a school improvement support. This may include demographic factors like race, ethnicity, scale or socioeconomic status. The term context is used throughout this capstone to also include important events that contribute to the current state and support full understanding of a problem and relevance of

a proposed solution. Such events could include, but are not limited to leadership changes, unexpected transitions or housing changes.

Context is a critical element when working against discriminatory and exclusive practices embedded in an organization's DNA. Change becomes real when we elevate the voice of those that receive the intervention. Sustainable and necessary change is achieved by blending community needs with the desires of the system's leaders through a standard process.

Background

As a point of context, my affiliation with the New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) dates back to 2004. Having held multiple roles in the system, I came to the organization with some degree of insider privilege and historical knowledge; however, my previous roles were outside of the Central Office. Chancellor Carranza's administration is the fifth I have worked with. Upon the start of my residency, the agency reorganized itself and experienced a couple critical events that created the setting for my strategic project.

The first and most significant event was the discontinuation of the Renewal Schools program. The Office of the First Deputy Chancellor (OFDC) is the compilation of several former offices – the Office of Field Support and the Office of School Renewal. The dissolution of the Office of School Renewal ended a four-year system-wide approach to school improvement. Renewal was a turnaround strategy that provided intensive, targeted support to the City's most struggling schools. The program began in 2014 as an effort to flood state-designated schools with “a slew of social services, including partnerships with non-profit organizations, extra mental health counseling, and dental clinics — in addition to academic help such as teacher training, longer school days, and new curriculum” (“NYC ends controversial Renewal turnaround program,” 2019). A group of veteran educators

designed the Renewal Program to double down on Mayor Bill de Blasio’s position to try to improve persistently struggling schools rather than close them.

The Renewal program was “designed to rapidly improve 94 of the city’s lowest-performing schools with a fixed menu of interventions, such as partnerships with social service organizations, changes to the curriculum, longer school days, and access to leadership coaches.” ([“NYC ends controversial Renewal turnaround program,” 2019](#)) School leaders received expert support from veteran specialists across a myriad of school needs. Each community school district had a Director of School Renewal, who supported designated schools. Throughout the system, there were mixed feelings about the impact and value of the program. However, a resounding majority of the system was concerned about the strategy that would follow Renewal, citing lack of clarity, specificity and loss of significant programmatic features like extended day ([“NYC ends controversial Renewal turnaround program,” 2019](#)).

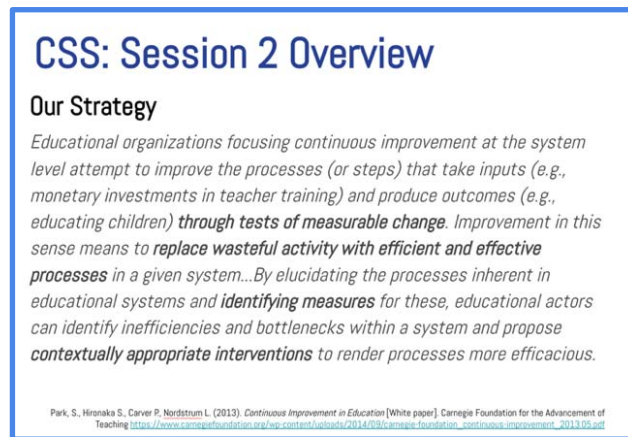
The controversial program ended after spending nearly \$773M over four years. First Deputy Chancellor Cheryl Watson-Harris sunset the program upon taking her current post. She believes that the Renewal program’s approach to supporting schools was “binary,” with the program's exclusive focus on failing schools leaving other schools without necessary resources. She believes Renewal was unfair because schools that were “good” schools had hidden needs, often in the form of disproportionality, that went overlooked. In addition, the First Deputy Chancellor holds the opinion that the Renewal Schools program lacked a clear strategy and took a kitchen-sink approach to school improvement.

In July 2019, Chancellor Carranza announced the Comprehensive School Support (CSS) strategy. This articulation is the second and most critical event. The CSS strategy is the brainchild of the First Deputy Chancellor. She often describes the strategy as every school

“getting what they need.” Such a strategy is a fundamental paradigm shift for the agency. Namely, CSS is symbolic of the administration’s belief in *Advancing Equity Now*.

CSS aims to provide support to schools in direct alignment to their capacity and performance, as measured by standard improvement metrics and tools at the system’s disposal: principal satisfaction surveys, school environment surveys, attendance data, demographic data and summative assessment results. OFDC created a set of indices that place schools in specific categories based on these measures. Throughout my residency, system-level leaders received tools to make sense of the categorizations.

In a presentation on July 17, 2019, the Central Employees understood that:



CSS: Session 2 Overview

Our Strategy

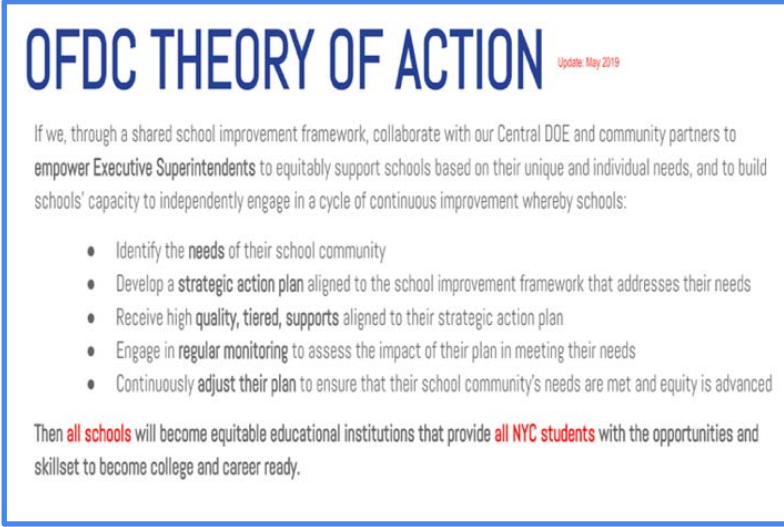
*Educational organizations focusing continuous improvement at the system level attempt to improve the processes (or steps) that take inputs (e.g., monetary investments in teacher training) and produce outcomes (e.g., educating children) **through tests of measurable change**. Improvement in this sense means to **replace wasteful activity with efficient and effective processes** in a given system...By elucidating the processes inherent in educational systems and **identifying measures** for these, educational actors can identify inefficiencies and bottlenecks within a system and propose **contextually appropriate interventions** to render processes more efficacious.*

Park, S., Hironaka S., Carver P., Nordstrom L. (2013). Continuous Improvement in Education [White paper]. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/carnegie-foundation_continuous-improvement_2013_05.pdf

The strategy contains the problems CSS seeks to solve and is anchored in improvement science research from the Carnegie Foundation. Within this articulation, the team named four possible ways that schools would receive support from the Central Office:

- **Equity Investments:** supports provided by central in the form of personnel and resources in high need school communities that can accelerate improvement
- **Pull-out Support:** Support provided by the field where school personnel attend field-based professional development
- **Push-in Support:** Support provided by the field, or contracted consultants, to provide on-site support to high-need areas and schools
- **Equity Assurances:** Superintendent and field oversight to ensure schools address specific equity factors through their planning and improvement. This might include additional visits/oversight
-

The OFDC Theory of Action accompanied this strategy. It states:



The graphic is a white rectangular box with a blue border. At the top left, the title "OFDC THEORY OF ACTION" is written in large, bold, blue capital letters. To the right of the title, in smaller red text, is "Update: May 2019". Below the title, there is a paragraph of text: "If we, through a shared school improvement framework, collaborate with our Central DOE and community partners to empower Executive Superintendents to equitably support schools based on their unique and individual needs, and to build schools' capacity to independently engage in a cycle of continuous improvement whereby schools:". This is followed by a bulleted list of five items: "Identify the needs of their school community", "Develop a strategic action plan aligned to the school improvement framework that addresses their needs", "Receive high quality, tiered, supports aligned to their strategic action plan", "Engage in regular monitoring to assess the impact of their plan in meeting their needs", and "Continuously adjust their plan to ensure that their school community's needs are met and equity is advanced". At the bottom of the box, another paragraph reads: "Then all schools will become equitable educational institutions that provide all NYC students with the opportunities and skillset to become college and career ready."

The strategy and Theory of Action center the school’s state-mandated Comprehensive Educational Plan. Given that all schools complete one of these plans, CSS attempts to articulate a hard shift to supporting all 1,800 schools in the way that they have self-identified in the plan. The bold prioritization of the Comprehensive Educational Plan signifies a commitment to anchoring centrally deployed school supports in school-based goals. This is unique because historically the plans have been a symbolic gesture.

The Challenge

The Comprehensive School Support (CSS) strategy seeks to provide every school, in every context, with the specific support that they require. While there is not a complete absence of strategy, what is evident is that there remains a “black box” of solution systems (Bryk, 2015). The overarching improvement strategy lives within a “package of activities” (Bryk, 2015), and there is murkiness on how these activities serve to solve a single problem and the outputs and outcomes anticipated by the system-level leadership. Academic Response Teams are one component of the CSS strategy, intended to serve schools that are on the cusp of slipping into a state designation or close to accelerating out of one.

With an understanding of the First Deputy Chancellor's vision, I knew that ART was different from the agency's traditional way of supporting schools. While the teams work across the City using a standard process, they implement a context-specific school support model, making their design and implementation different from anything the system has ever attempted to do. Insofar as the local context is vital to ART, the agency's leadership, history and political dynamics also impact the strategic project. The project is encapsulated by the entangled tapestry of simultaneous initiatives, historical ideologies activities and actions that happen throughout the organization.

The challenge of creating ART was strategic, technical and adaptive. The work called for deep interrogation of traditional methods and a shift toward supporting communities to co-construct viable action plans for change. Therefore, the success of ART rested upon the agency's capacity to let go of long-held ideological beliefs about school improvement.

Preview of Findings

Many themes emerged throughout design and implementation of Academic Response Teams including how a system-level leader might approach a system-wide equity strategy. A key lesson learned is that any strategy, especially an equity-based one, requires a set of clearly articulated actions and activities that are aligned to specific outputs and outcomes. Also, such a strategy requires intentional attention to the discarding of obsolete behaviors, both ostensibly and individually, especially when shifting to a context-based improvement model. Context-driven school improvement that uses a standard process and is anchored in a shared strategy and theory of action shifts behavior more rapidly and coherently.

I also choose to focus on broad ideas that seem most critical to the continuation of ART and to operationalizing equity in context at the system level. My interrogation of the project and central themes calls forth bodies of research that have been impactful in and out of the education sector. I discuss these in the review of knowledge for action. Strategic actions that I took when engineering the program design, implementation and transitioning the work to a team are discussed in the description.

After that is an analysis of the leadership and critical moments that I encountered throughout the project, using anecdotal evidence to illuminate the impact and potential of ART. Essential to my analysis is a core tension between prescriptive support and inclusive support when attempting to use context as a driver for change. Next, I discuss power and ossified habits in a mature organization. I discuss factors that support the strategic project and those that posed as barriers to success. Finally, the formation of ART in the NYC DOE presents implications for the work ahead - for me, the site, and the sector. The implication section also contains recommendations for a continuation of ART in New York City.

Review of Knowledge for Action

“A system of education is not one thing, nor does it have a single definite object, nor is it a mere matter of schools. Education is that whole system of human training within and without schoolhouse walls, which molds and develops men.” (WEB Du Bois, 1986)

The New York City Department of Education has traditionally given schools academic support through mandates, as a result of warning systems or in response to state designations. Schools that are failing generally receive the most resources, frequently finding themselves inundated with disjointed support and mixed messages. In contrast, higher-performing schools and those in the middle receive very little support because their key performance indicators do not show glaring concerns at a superficial level. However, when disaggregated the data of higher-performing schools often shows significant signs of

disproportionality and inequity across many subgroups: Black, Hispanic, students with disabilities, English language learners and economically disadvantaged.

Disproportionality in achievement, disciplinary practices, access to quality instruction, attendance, and opportunity to learn are major contributors to the inequities experienced throughout the sector. Lack of specificity in support often exacerbates inequity. In order for students to learn and thrive, their schools must be supported in a specific manner, aligned to locally expressed needs and intended outcomes. Failure to provide support in this way lands as irrelevant and often reinforces inequity experienced at the local level. School improvement support must match the circumstances, cultural features, expressed needs and priorities of the schools and communities.

Academic Response Teams (ART) represent an exercise in school improvement that attempts to provide support that is contextually fit. The work of these teams serves as a model for elevating the vast variation in how children experience school across a myriad of circumstances as the driver for improvement in the largest and most diverse school system in the nation. ART center the setting of school improvement efforts as a way to ensure that education services are locally anchored and thereby student- and community-centered.

ART are adaptive and divergent, yet simple in their purpose. This review of knowledge for action focuses on several guiding questions. First, I explore the extent to which a school system can consider specific contextual features when providing support to schools. I present the work of strategists and educational historians to illuminate the role of context in school reform design and the fight for equity in schools. I choose to focus on the particular considerations a system should examine when designing and providing system-wide school improvement support. Finally, I examine the role of unlearning in organizational change.

Strategy in Context

“To educate the Negro we must find out exactly what his background is, what he is today, what his possibilities are, and how to begin with him as he is and make him a better individual of the kind that he is. Instead of cramming the Negro’s mind with what others have shown that they can do, we should develop his latent powers that he may perform in society a part of which others are not capable.” (Woodson, 2018)

Historian Carter G. Woodson’s words emphasize the importance of understanding the children we serve. This idea is as relevant in 2020 as it was when he expressed it in 1933. Current discourse about improving schools asks if support to schools should be centralized or decentralized. Most superintendents (or principals, for that matter) often do not agree about the intensity, direction or type of support that brings about change (Johnson et al., 2015). Perhaps the actual question is less about centralization, and more about explicitly connecting a theory of change and strategy to the context of the intervention.

A theory of change is a well-informed prediction that grounds a strategy. Such a theory explicitly states how a change will come about, generally in the form ‘if we do x, then we will accomplish y’ (Johnson et al., 2015). While a theory of change articulates a prediction of how actions will create an outcome, it must be accompanied by a strategy that is neither haphazard nor unfocused (Johnson et al., 2015). The strategy that accompanies a theory of change must articulate a set of actions and activities designed to work dynamically to achieving anticipated goals. It is also crucial that a strategy is developed, vetted and accepted by stakeholders. Further, once vetted, the components of any strategy must acknowledge the interdependence of the separate components of a change initiative and factors already present in the system.

In large urban school systems, it is difficult to focus on single components of a strategy because of the myriad problems that need to be addressed. Also, there are often many variables at play that impact the organization in intended and unintended ways. Often community circumstances vary widely across many dimensions, inherently meaning that

what works in one context is not necessarily useful for all (Johnson et al., 2015). However, the responsibility for the system to meet the needs of various units in the system still exists.

A strategy can be successful when accompanied by a robust theory of change and a set of carefully crafted actions and activities that are aligned to the context. The actions and activities become difficult to manage in a large, complex organization, often elevating competing priorities and making the strategy challenging to manage and keep on course. Both centralization and decentralization have the ability to improve schools. Neither approach should see the solution to inequity as equal distribution of resources regardless of the autonomy structure (Johnson, et al., 2015).

No single strategy or theory of change is sufficient (Johnson et al., 2015). What matters most is whether the parts of the strategy work together coherently to support the work of teachers and leaders at schools and in classrooms (Johnson et al., 2015). Any system can be successful with careful attention to strategy development and implementation aligned to needs or perceived needs of the organization (Johnson et al., 2015). The strategy, theory of action and system do not live in a vacuum. Internal and external forces, both in isolation and in concert, have the potential to accelerate or interrupt progress. As these forces act on organizations, internal forces in the form of systems, structures and behaviors should provide conditions to appropriately incubate change. Therefore, any improvement strategy or system-wide reform must consider the five criteria for successful reform presented by Cohen and Mehta. In a piece titled, *Why Reform Sometimes Succeeds: Understanding the Conditions that Produce Reforms that Last*, Cohen and Mehta describe at least five characteristics of successful education reforms (Cohen & Mehta, 2017). This capstone elevates four.

Why Reforms Succeed

First, Cohen and Mehta argue that reforms are successful when they are aligned to a problem that educators knew that they wanted to solve, and met a felt need for the people who would implement them ([Cohen & Mehta, 2017](#)). Education reform is generally the result of policy and rarely considers the expressed needs of those who receive actions taken on behalf of the policies. Cohen and Mehta name that successful reforms take root when there are demands from communities strong enough to move schools to dramatic change. The reform itself mobilizes current resources without a profound change to the social technologies of schooling ([Cohen & Mehta, 2017](#)).

Reforms also succeed when they offer a solution that illuminates a real problem that educators had not been aware of, or could not figure out how to solve. Frequently, this will cause educators to embrace a reform once they saw or believed that it would help. Thus, these reforms both illuminate a problem of practice and offer a solution ([Cohen & Mehta, 2017](#)). Such a reform may also enable users to see that there is a deeper problem that they have not yet discovered ([Cohen & Mehta, 2017](#)). Solution-building that is aligned to the user's characterization of a problem is essential in order to have a reform that is both welcomed and sustainable.

Reforms are also successful when they offer educational tools, materials and practical guidance for educators, or they help educators capitalize on existing tools, materials and guidance ([Cohen & Mehta, 2017](#)). Such reforms require less capacity-building and focus on using resources that schools and school systems already have access to, thus making the reform a mechanism for strengthening capacity, redistribution of resources and affirming a school's ability to remedy its own issues.

When reforms satisfy the demands from political, economic or social circumstances of schools and are consistent with the values of educators and students, they are fruitful in creating change ([Cohen & Mehta, 2017](#)). The values of the educators identify features in the local context that support driving the system-wide reform. Academic Response Teams represent a system-wide reform that did not require a profound change in practice or extensive capacity-building ([Cohen & Mehta, 2017](#)). Therefore, the approach can be adopted widely and rapidly without significant changes to existing operating infrastructure. To an extent, the reform works within the current culture of the organization. By inference, Cohen and Mehta name that reforms are most successful when they are driven by the context where the opportunity for change exists. Alignment between an organization's theory of change, strategy and reform and the context is a prerequisite condition for successful impact (Johnson et al., Cohen & Mehta, 2017).

Context & Community

Dr. Vanessa Siddle-Walker is known for her collection of texts that illuminate excellence in the history of black education. In both *The Lost Education of Horace Tate and "Their Highest Potential,"* Walker chronicles stories of self-taught Blacks in the Antebellum South. In her text titled *"Their Highest Potential,"* Walker highlights the significance of understanding a community, culture or people beyond memories of inequity ([Siddle-Walker, 1996](#)). In her opening, she challenges readers to Remember the Good (Siddle-Walker, 1996). She states:

The memory is not thus inaccurate. However, to remember segregated schools largely by recalling only their poor resources presents a historically incomplete picture. . . some evidence suggests that that the environment of the segregated school had affective traits, institutional policies and community support that helped black children learn in spite of the neglect of their schools . . .the schools are remembered as having atmospheres of support, encouragement and rigid standards ([Siddle-Walker, 1996](#)).

In both texts, Walker asks educators to look beneath the surface of common narratives and find the good that can be mobilized on behalf of children. Walker's assertion is a discrete call to educators of Black children to consider the value that communities, families and local leaders bring to the exercise of educating their children. Including community voices in the construction of reform and improvement strategies shapes schools and systems in line with the communities' aspirations and known capacities.

In Walker's *The Lost Education of Horace Tate*, she writes about the journey of a teacher who became a principal turned advocate and politician. Dr. Horace Tate believed that Negro educators' goal was to improve society (Walker, 2020). Many of the teachers did not have advanced teaching degrees, and their schools did not have accessible bathrooms or toilets, and nothing that resembled a science lab, but the schools had core values (Walker, 2020). In the case of Dr. Tate, he was a high-powered community leader because of his understanding of the community and its distinct desire to provide real education to Negro children (Walker, 2020). Dr. Tate was relentless in his efforts to make the voices of the silenced heard.

Dr. Tate's activism and organizing was a precursor to a body of work that connects urban school reform and community development. Dr. Terrance Green, in a study titled *Leading for Urban Reform and Community Development*, affirms that Tate's work was not an anomaly, but a necessary pattern of behavior that unsurprisingly emerges when school systems seek the perspectives of principals. Green asserts that equitable school improvement is catalyzed by principals who play a critical role in forging robust connections between schools and their local communities (Green, 2015). Principals therefore serve as "durable links" between schools and communities, often serving as the primary negotiator between the powers of the school system and the aspirations of the community (Green, 2015).

Green's work illustrates his familiarity with the work of Dr. Tate. Green propounds that current school principals should serve as community leaders and advocates for equity-centered issues that are relevant to the community (Green, 2015). Principals maintain more asset-based perspectives of underserved communities; however, the principal cannot do the work alone. Green calls for cross-boundary leadership from those in three key levels of a school system: leaders on the ground, leaders in the middle and leaders in local communities (Green, 2015). In fact, such leadership creates shared influence and collective responsibility for the transformation situated in context.

Contextual Fit

Each of the aforementioned authors thematically hoist the primacy of contextual understanding when working to improve the circumstances of others. A 2014 report from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services echoes a similar notion. The report calls for the human service sector to consider context in its normal service and business affairs and centers on a concept called contextual-fit. contextual-fit is the match between the strategies, procedures or elements of an intervention and the values, needs, skills and resources of those who implement and receive the intervention ([What Is Contextual Fit?, 2015](#)).

The research defines an intervention as “what we do to achieve desired outcomes.” ([What Is Contextual Fit?, 2015](#)). They include the behaviors, tools and protocols used for assessment, intervention, data collection and evaluation ([What Is Contextual Fit?, 2015](#)). A contextually-fit initiative or reform is attentive to specific elements articulated in *Appendix A*.

Even when elements, actions and activities are aligned with evidence-based strategies, the impact can be muted if the intervention or support is not fit to the conditions of the receiving environment. Moreover, when the fit between the setting and the

intervention is aligned and synchronous, momentum toward intended outcomes is increased. Contextual-fit requires synchronicity. Behaviors, expectations and core elements of an intervention have a higher chance of impact when there is correspondence with existing elements, tools and resources within a school, community or broader system. Hence, the existence of the tools and resources in an environment does not naturally cause impact (*What is Contextual Fit?*, 2015). Significant consideration must be given to the unique features within the setting that support or inhibit the desired impact. Asynchronous action diminishes impact (*What is Contextual Fit?*, 2015). A popular education example illuminates this notion:

. . . a core feature of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports is defining and teaching a small number of social expectations to all students in the school. The core feature is the building of the school wide culture with a common set of expectations. However, although this core feature is common across settings, the specific expectations for teaching these expectations can vary across elementary, middle and high schools and across urban, suburban and rural schools. The social and ethnic culture of a community may affect how these expectations are constructed and taught. The core feature is held constant, but the procedures to achieve the core feature are adapted to the context (*What Is Contextual Fit?*, 2015).

Unlearning

Intrapreneurial leadership seeks to innovate from within an organization using resources that are currently available in the context. Most organizations have an inherent bias toward the familiar ([Bailey et al., 2018](#)). The goal for any intrapreneur is to convince stakeholders in an organization that the status quo is far more dangerous than the uncertainty of change (Kotter, 2008). Often this means that an intrapreneur is using current resources in new ways ([Deprez & Euwema, 2017](#)). In the act of change, the intrapreneur will likely come into contact with an organization's immunity system in the form of habits, routines and behaviors. Research from Deloitte states that barriers to innovation within organizations manifest in the form of three common traps:

Familiarity trap: Favoring the familiar over the unfamiliar
Maturity trap: Favoring the mature over the nascent.

Propinquity trap: Favoring proximity to existing solutions rather than completely new solutions. (Deloitte, 2015)

Notably, in hierarchical environments, these traps are amplified. The rigid structures within organizations ignore or actively suppress ideas that are created from the bottom up or within (Deloitte, 2015). Because intrapreneurs are nimble at acting outside of such structures, they are often able to incubate ideas and activate real change. Intrapreneurship can function as an incubator for a substantial change in the way an organization conceptualizes the use of its resources; however, intrapreneurs are rare in mature organizations. Therefore, change in large mature organizations often requires unlearning.

Unlearning has many meanings and is often an overlooked concept in change management. Conceptually, unlearning most often involves intentionally discarding obsolete knowledge that surface in the form of behaviors, mindsets, habits or routines. When such knowledge is removed, space is created for change or increased performance (Tsang & Zahra, 2008).

In the process of unlearning, there can be several actions. First is the discarding. Next is whether there is a judgment placed on what is discarded. Finally, an organization may choose whether discarded content will be replaced by new knowledge (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Three concrete definitions of unlearning anchor this capstone:

1. A systematic removal of information that is outdated or no longer useful to management decision-making (Hamel, 1991; Tsang & Zahra, 2008).
2. The process of reframing past success programs in order to fit them with changing environmental and situational conditions (Lyles, 2001; Tsang & Zahra, 2008).
3. Discarding old routines and understandings that are no longer useful and which are blocking much needed learning” (Martin de Holan & Phillips, 2004; Tsang & Zahra, 2008).

Zahra asserts that organizational change comes as a result of intentional unlearning. Specifically, intentionality is required to remove information that is obsolete or

tangential to new strategies or change initiatives. Unlearning is distinctly different from institutional memory loss because forgetting can come as voluntary or involuntary while unlearning is deliberate. For example, voluntary departures from a unit or dissolving an office can remove structures that support a particular ideology, but many of the habits and behaviors remain in the human parts of the organization (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Also, some organizations attempt to remove memory by downsizing. These examples are different from unlearning because they are about the unintentional loss of routine that is often spurred by organizational inertia (Tsang & Zahra, 2008).

The age of the organization is one source of such inertia. As organizations become older, many practices happen out of habit. The familiarity trap often shows up in the organization's constituents justifying practices with the saying, "because that is how we always do it (Deloitte, 2015)." Traditional methods are often connected to the identity of the organization and individuals within it. Generally, individuals in leadership legitimize their positional authority through fluency in old or obsolete behaviors during organizational change (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). These leaders also experience change as more disruptive in mature organizations because of the collective memory of individuals in the organization. The collective memory often leads to involuntary behaviors that are a result of individuals having repeatedly performed the old routines. Such routines then form their work habits (Tsang & Zahra, 2008).

Mature organizations, like the New York City Department of Education, experience change often. With each new administration, there are new focuses, initiatives and workflows. Zahra highlights that the simple elimination of a routine or program is not unlearning, and neither is strategy abandonment. Particularly, mature organizations hold institutional memory in the tools that are used and the individuals that use them. He calls

these “ostensive and performative” routines, respectively. The ostensive routines refer to the schema or processes that change. Ostensive changes may look like new meeting structures, templates or reorganizations. Performative routines are the behaviors that individuals in the organization display (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). In mature organizations, the unlearning of the performative aspect is very difficult. Often, leaders ask for discontinuation of certain practices; however, they are unaware of the ossified nature of the routines, habits, mindsets and involuntary reward systems within the culture that cause individuals to continue with business as usual (Tsang & Zahra, 2008).

Zahra wrote about unlearning in 2015; however, the roots of his ideology rest in a historical text by Arthur L. Stinchcombe of John Hopkins University. In 1965, Stinchcombe wrote a widely-known text entitled *Social Structure and Organizations*. His writing mostly raises the idea that organizations have a history that determines aspects of how it operates in the present (Stinchcombe, 1965). He notes that the behaviors of an organization are imprinted from their inception during a small window of time. The notion of imprinting is more in-depth than a “history matters” ideology, but names that past conditions and purpose for an organization influences its future (Stinchcombe, 1965). Therefore, no matter the age of the organization, its activity during critical periods of its existence creates core memories that persist for its lifetime. While some of the behaviors fade, many persist and often become more influential over time, especially in sensitive times or times of change (Stinchcombe, 1965). Therefore, as the organization ages and experiences more and more change, there is inherent interplay and intersectionality between its generations of imprints (Stinchcombe, 1965). Inherently, these imprints exist in the individuals and can often show up as psychological scarring that makes some resistant to change.

Collections and layers of imprints in mature organizations create the imperative for unlearning. When organizations fail to unlearn, the acquisition of new institutional knowledge is superimposed onto old beliefs, practices and routines, thereby making the change process more chaotic, non-linear and non-sequential (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Additionally, measuring effectiveness and impact of specific variables becomes difficult because causal links can be unclear (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). It can be challenging to know where inefficiencies are coming from because the information is stored in ostensive and “human storage bins” (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Therefore, the organizational challenge in

organizational unlearning often lies in erasing the contents of human storage bins. Unless members concerned are removed or expelled from the organization, individual unlearning is involved. Individual unlearning is often a cumbersome and energy-consuming process (Hedberg, 1981). Moreover, at the individual level, learning anxiety and survival anxiety may inhibit people from unlearning what they know in order to learn something new (Coutu, 2002) (Tsang & Zahra, 2008)

An approach to school improvement that operationalizes equity in schools must consider collective phenomena and history detailed in this review of the literature. These bodies of work present an impetus for a large organization to examine both the organization at the system level as well as micro contexts when developing a strategy for school improvement. Additionally, this review presents ideas that express the importance of context at the system level and the local level. Only when the voices of the recipient of services are centered in the composition and implementation of school improvement support are all parties implicated in collective improvement.

Thus:

If . . . I

- (a) refine the initial vision of Academic Response Teams and adapt it to the climate, culture, context, scale and priorities of the New York City Department of Education with a research-based anchor,
- (b) influence and shape institutional thinking about the comprehensive school support strategy,

- (c) track, understand and influence conceptions of ART as school improvement at multiple levels of the agency and with external partners (labor unions),
- (d) deeply shape the teaming and professional learning of the ART leaders,

Then . . . I can stand up a minimum viable project for Academic Response Teams by October 2019, refine the model in a second iteration by January 2020 and co-construct tools for using the model at scale with input from the field by April 2020.

Strategic Project Description

“Transformation doesn’t happen in a linear way, at least not one that we can always track, It happens in cycles, convergences, explosions. If we release the framework of failure, we can realize that we are in iterative cycles, and we can keep asking ourselves - how do I learn from this.” (Brown, 2017)

Phase I: Fact Finding

On July 19, 2019, the Office of the First Deputy Chancellor (OFDC) experienced the sudden departure of the Senior Executive Director for Continuous School Improvement. This senior-level executive was a critical actor in school improvement for the agency. His departure presented a significant opportunity to transform the OFDC into a hub for school improvement. For one month, we designed and analyzed countless iterations of organization charts. The final organizational chart situated the yet-to-be-conceived Academic Response Teams (ART) in the Office of Instructional Support Student Services and Professional Learning, a team within the OFDC.

The First Deputy Chancellor, Cheryl Watson-Harris, first saw a version of ART in action as a principal in Boston Public Schools. Her school was a recipient of the intervention. ART were a spinoff of Cross-Functional Rapid Support Teams (C-FRST) in Boston Public Schools, first created in 2009 in its Central Office for Support and Accountability. Cheryl Watson-Harris instituted the model in the Brooklyn South catchment area during her time as an Executive Director of the Field Support Center where the project supported five of the city’s 32 districts. The demographics of this catchment area are distinct.. There are high populations of immigrant families and remarkable contrasts between

the Crown Heights and Coney Island communities versus middle class communities like Bay Ridge, Bensonhurst and Marine Park. Therefore, the first challenge in designing the teams from the system level was to devise a structure that addressed variation in the collective city context.

Designing the ART model for New York City required some intensive fact-finding. Throughout the summer of 2019, the First Deputy Chancellor would speak of the work that the teams did in Boston. Her staff gifted me all of the documents that accompanied the school visits, documents that were used to engage the schools and those meant to inform principals about progress. While there seemed to be a vision, there was no core body of research to support the initiative, thereby making it challenging to write job descriptions, recruit personnel, and convince senior-level leaders and labor partners that ART was credible, viable and worthwhile. Additionally, all of the historical documentation was aligned to how this program looked in a single school with little to no information about how the program would look at the system level.

As a first step, I worked with leaders in the OFDC in order to clearly understand the problem that ART was meant to solve. City Hall funded ART through a new need request of about \$10M. The request asked for more instructional support for schools that were in danger of slipping into a state designation. Some leaders thought ART served as cover language to acquire more funding for instructional personnel at the Borough Central Offices. They believed that ART was not an actual program that would come to fruition, but a way to provide more instructional leads to the borough offices. The first adaptive task was to create a way to make this project a solution for the two problems presented: create instructional impact as scale and solve for instructional personnel shortages at the borough offices.

Using information that I gleaned from many documents, interviews and observations, I created an anchoring paradigm and theory of action for ART. Although I did not yet have the research to support the project I was able to develop the language to drive job descriptions, iterate upon current thinking and move the work from an idea to strategic action. The language read:

Academic Response Teams are a multi-team system of experienced educators who provide intensive, hands-on coaching to principals, school leadership, teacher leaders, and classroom teachers to improve professional practice and accelerate student learning. Teams provide unique, on-site support in rapid cycles that last 6-8 weeks, focused on school level capacity-building through a gradual release model that entrusts school teams with implementation of a post-support sustainability plan which is monitored by the ART, principal and superintendent.

Through conversations with the First Deputy Chancellor and other leaders in the office, I learned that this project needed specificity. The actions that ART would take needed clear boundaries, or their work would become the catchall for school support in the borough offices. To this end, I defined the purpose:

Academic Response Teams are not sustained support for schools, but function as just-in-time support for schools that are close to meeting important benchmarks and accelerating those that are regressing. ART engagement is customized for the school context, precise, aligned to the school's Comprehensive Educational Plan (CEP) and the Chancellor's priorities. Academic Response Teams are a unique approach to deploying central resources in a manner that supports equity, builds local capacity, leverages improvement science principles and provides context-specific support necessary at the school level.

Context-specific support is what makes ART both unique and challenging. Each of the 1,800 schools in New York City is situated in distinctive communities, cultures and settings. Knowing and understanding the contexts of each school is the charge for those leading teaching and learning in the borough and district offices. The nine borough offices, each led by an Executive Superintendent, serve catchment areas that range between 70 and 309 schools. Two of the nine borough offices serve schools citywide, while the others are

bounded geographically. Given the diverse nature of schools and communities across the city, ART are inherently charged with having a deep understanding of the historical demographics, community interests and priorities of the schools they serve.

During the fact-finding phase, I visited each borough office in an effort to understand the schools, politics and interests myself. In conversations with each ART Director, I learned how each borough office was organized and the tools they planned to use with schools. The nine Executive Superintendents collectively manage 46 superintendents, each of who supervises up to 36 schools. Given both the tremendous variation and the scale of the system, ART concentrated its effort on connecting school improvement science to local contexts. Therefore, my thorough understanding of how each borough office was organized was critical to designing a process and strategy that would be feasible for broad implementation.

There is dramatic demographic variation across New York City. For this reason, ART personnel were dispersed proportionally according to the volume of schools in the catchment areas as well as contextual differences at the local level. The former Senior Executive Director designed the equity-driven distribution before transitioning out of the role. The distribution assigned one ART Director to each of the nine borough offices and a number of ART Specialists that was directly correlated to the inequities and academic needs of the catchment area. For example, Brooklyn North serves 251 schools in many of the most poverty-stricken communities in the city; therefore, they have 10 ART Specialists. ART staffing at Brooklyn North is in direct contrast to staffing in Queens North, which is much smaller in terms of schools served and represents a more middle class demographic. Queens North has one ART Director and two Specialists. The funding granted by City Hall covered a total ART headcount of 58. Fifty-four people in the headcount were located in the field at

borough offices, while four Central positions were maintained for city-wide coordination and leadership. *See Appendix B.*

Thus:

If Academic Response Teams, through non-evaluative, capacity building, 6-8 week support deployments and a shared school improvement framework, utilize evidence-based strategies, empower school leadership to develop staff capacity and strengthen cycles of continuous improvement whereby staff:

- *Identify the needs of their school community*
- *Develop a strategic action plan aligned to the school improvement framework that addresses their needs*
- *Utilize high-quality, tiered, evidence-based strategies aligned to their strategic action plan*
- *Engage in regular monitoring to assess the impact of their plan in meeting their needs*
- *Demonstrate their capacity to continuously adjust their plan to ensure that their school community's needs are met, and equity is advanced*

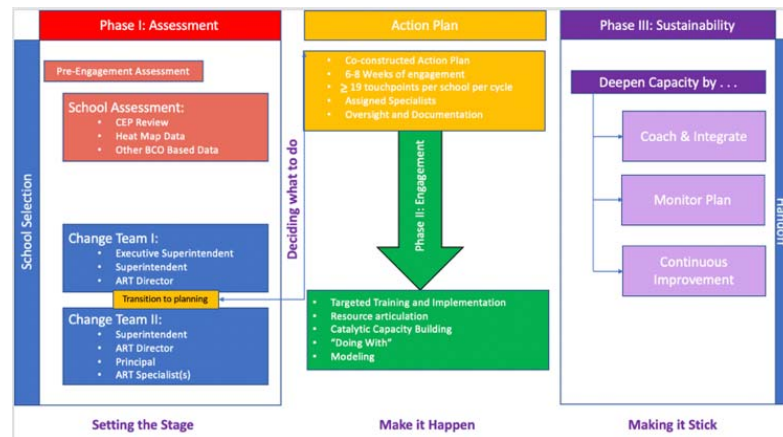
Then New York City public schools that are engaged by Academic Response Teams will experience significant improvement and be on track to become more equitable educational institutions that narrow the opportunity gap for students.

Phase II: Design

Leveraging this theory of action, I searched for a research base that would provide a “shared school improvement framework” because this was language explicitly used in the Academic Response Teams (ART) and Office of the First Deputy Chancellor theories of change. I settled on two distinct bodies of work. The first was an adaptation of TeamSTEPPS, a teaming and communication process used in healthcare settings all over the world, first developed to increase patient safety.

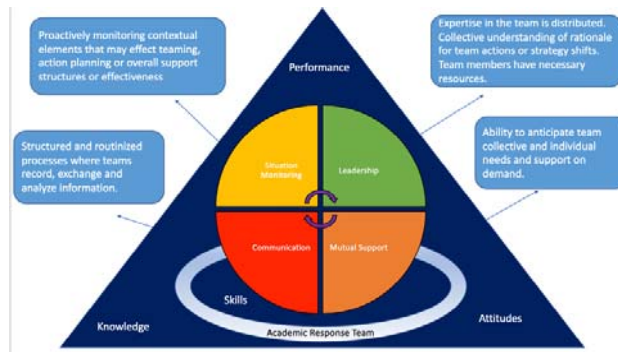
The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Defense, created the TeamSTEPPS process. The framework, curriculum and process teach clinical and nonclinical providers to communicate, team and empower one another effectively. The standard process of TeamSTEPPS conceptually derives from high-reliability organizations such as military operations, aviation, emergency response systems and nuclear power industries. All of these industries focus on mitigating risk, accident avoidance and accident recovery (Health Research & Educational Trust, 2015).

ART work by using a standard process adapted from TeamSTEPPS. The process is keenly focused on co-constructing action plans that link support and supervision, triangulate all levels of data and fit distinct school-level contexts. The process is highlighted below:



The ART process accounts for the school selection, gathering of context, triangulation of data, action planning and sustainability. Phase I is the assessment phase, when ART works to determine the needs of the school based on both centralized data and conversations with local community superintendents and principals. Next, is the co-construction of the Action Plan. Once the Action Plan is approved by all constituents, ART begin engagement with a school in a six to eight-week cycle. During this time, the ART Specialists, in pods of two or more, push into the school with the supports identified in the co-constructed Action Plan. At the end of the six to eight-week cycle, ART Specialists meet again with local leadership to discuss the impact of the engagement and to co-construct a Sustainability Plan. The Sustainability Plan serves as a record of the actions taken in the school, as well as any actions or activities that must be done to keep the momentum built during the cycle.

In addition to adapting the process that ART would follow, I also adapted a teaming process from *TeamSTEPPS*:



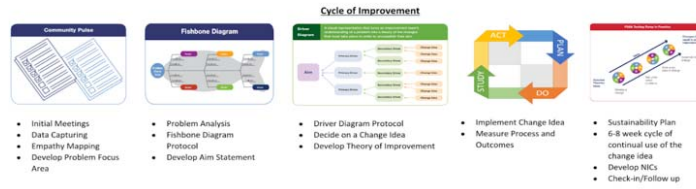
ART as an approach to school improvement require teaming that is similar to that in high-reliability sectors. The teaming approach supports a heterarchical style of working together and with schools. The goal of the teaming model is to create shared leadership where power patterns and dynamics continuously shift based on the demands of the school being served and the type of expertise required (Aime et al., 2014). This model allows the expertise of ART Specialists to complement one another and anticipate how their colleagues could bridge gaps in their knowledge. ART members are then positioned to recognize the dynamic nature of power and expertise when supporting across contexts in different school settings across the City.

The actions and activities taken by ART are anchored in Anthony Bryk’s conceptualization of improvement science. ART are designed to “take a disciplined approach to educational innovation that supports teachers and school leaders in collaborating to solve specific problems of practice” (Bryk et al., 2018). The work of Bryk, the President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, is used throughout the education sector. Improvement science has clear objectives and steps. One ART articulated this very clearly in their process:



Improvement Science

Improvement Science¹ is a disciplined approach to educational innovation that supports teachers and school leaders in collaborating to solve specific problems of practice. Improvement Science can be used to improve student learning and performance and reduce achievement gaps by improving the day-to-day work of students, teachers, and school leaders.



¹ Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grannan, A., & Lombino, P. G. (2018). *Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better*. Lightning Source, Inc., 1240 Hill Quaker Blvd, LA, Virginia, TN, 37066.

While I did not explicitly introduce the concept of improvement science broadly, the principles anchored the work that all ART were doing. At the time of design, it made more sense to have them understand improvement science in practice than to become bogged down in developing the appropriate lexicon and nomenclature.

Phase III: Launch

I received full authorization to lead and launch the project on September 17, 2019. We intended to launch the project in the first week of October; however, there was a delay. Ahead of a full launch, one Executive Superintendent launched into schools, preemptively. As a result, some relationships spoiled before the teams could be thoroughly vetted in the community. A conversation with a principal and the ART team revealed that the team had been instructed to go into the school and remedy significant issues that had been revealed in summative state exam data. As a result of the preemptive ART engagement, the Council of School Administrators, the local principals' union, reached out to discuss what they perceived as a problematic issue for their members.

I met with the union alongside key members from OFDC. In the meeting, I worked to assure them that the preemptive launch was a mistake. One of the union's biggest concerns was making sure that principals did not feel as if they were losing their local school-level autonomy to the Central Office. The union leaders wanted principals to feel

safe from micromanagement or retaliation. To ease this concern, I discussed the intentions of the project, the design and how we envisioned moving forward. We called it a full reset.

The two-hour meeting ended with a few agreements. The first was that we set up a future meeting to discuss the impact of cycle one. Second, I promised to share the schools that were engaged in cycle one. Finally, I agreed to work with our Senior Counsel to draft a set of expectations for ART engagement. The expectations set clear guidelines for engaging with Community Superintendents, principals, and schools. I also crafted sample emails of introduction and templates to record the conversations. *See Appendix C.*

ART launched on October 16, 2019. Instead of creating a suite of tools for the teams, I gathered documents and approaches from the field. This served useful in building the model, trust and credibility. When visiting the ART Directors at borough offices, I noticed significant variability; however, there was also a considerable amount of coherence around a shared school improvement framework, the process outlined above. Understanding how each team was organized and their priorities helped to shape my leadership throughout design, launch and the transition. I led by providing direction that was gleaned from the Directors' visions, but anchored in the common approach to improvement science. I supported each ART Director by describing the priorities that matter most to the project.

Since context and co-construction were the driving force for all interventions, I created shared drives to collect all resources, templates, action plans and reports in one location. The shared drives supported my thinking about what the Central ART would do and offered a mechanism to celebrate the individual talents of the Directors and engage them as architects of the project. The information they provided also helped me to refine the vision for Cycle Two and led to a clear arc for the remainder of the school year. *See Appendix D.*

Cycle one reached 55 schools and 35,000 students across all five boroughs. However, cycle two needed to be better by reigning in rogue practices and supporting teams that did not fully understand improvement science. The project moved so quickly that it was challenging to make sure that all ART personnel used the standard process, chose schools aligned to the goals of the project and adequately engaged Community Superintendents and principals.

Phase IV: Iterate and Transition

After cycle one launched, I was able to spend more time in the Central Office to work on developing iterations and improvements to the project. I quickly reoriented my lens from the individual teams back to the system-level strategy. I developed a comprehensive project plan and looped OFDC colleagues into the plan to contribute and support focus. I also focused on the tactile elements of how the year would play out, complete with a logic model. The minimum viable project was running, but there was a need for more structure and coherence regarding the process and behaviors of teams, so I developed a year's view of the work ahead.

ART Year-Long Vision 2019-2020
MVP and Refine 1

August	September	October	November	December
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ART Hing ART Model Review 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ART Hing Diverse School Lists ES Meetings for ART Conference Call for ART 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> DART Meeting 10.2 CSD Engagement 10.4 Cycle 1 Begins 10.10* DART Meeting 10.23 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> DART Meeting 11.13 Self Training 11.20 DART Meeting 11.27 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> DART Meeting 12.4 Self Training 12.11 DART Meeting 12.11 Cycle 1 Ends 12.20
January 2020 Cycle 2 Begins January 21				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sustainability Plans conferences, approvals and distributed by January 17 DART Meeting 1.15.20 DART Meeting 1.29.20 Cycle 1 Review and Handoff <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What schools will get BCO support? What will it be? Cycle 2 Preparation - Begin January 21 - End 4.3.20 (9 weeks) Cycle 2 High Schools - January 21 (initial conversations) - 4.3.20 Sustainability Plans - May 1, 2020 				
February <ul style="list-style-type: none"> DART Meeting 2.12 Mid-Winter Break 2.17-21 	March <ul style="list-style-type: none"> DART Meeting 3.11 DART Meeting 3.25 	April <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cycle 2 Ends 4.3.20* DART Meeting 4.8.20 Spring Break 4.9-17 	May & June <ul style="list-style-type: none"> DART Meeting May 13 DART Meeting May 27 CEO Support Cycle 1 and 2 schools Check back and progress memos CSD Feedback re: self implementation Review Instructional Reports BP/IEP Transition BCO Support Planning for 2020-2021 	

*There are some delays in service to all schools

Within two weeks after the project launch, the Senior Director of Academic Response Teams began working alongside myself and one ART Lead at the Central Office. The Senior Director of ART was interviewed by me, the leaders of the ISSPL unit and the First Deputy Chancellor. The person is a veteran in the organization with nearly 26 years of

service in and out of the New York City Department of Education. The candidate was hired even though his previous experience was not a natural fit to lead the intrapreneurial, innovative and adaptive nature of the project.

The Senior Director of ART was hired to lead the Central team and the project across the city. This shifted my role and I met significant challenges as I onboarded the Senior Director, which I discuss in the analysis. As a centrally based leader, the Senior Director was charged with iterating on the current, creating professional learning experiences for ART Directors, scaling implementation, evaluating progress and leading the day-to-day operations of the Central-based ART Leads. The Senior Director was also supposed to lead the charge of school improvement through improvement science by creating practical guidance, tools and materials that support the multidisciplinary teams in the field. The Senior Director should also ensure that systems and structures are in place for continued team effectiveness to accelerate teaching, learning and accelerated student achievement. The Senior Director was charged with doing this through the ART Leads and the borough office-based ART Directors ([\(1\) Senior Director of Academic Response Team | NYC Department of Education | LinkedIn, n.d.](#))

Through conversations with colleagues in OFDC and the First Deputy Chancellor, I developed a professional learning sequence before the Senior Director's arrival. It seemed that much of the learning needed to be focused on Adaptive Leadership. Because the ART model represents a paradigm shift in school support, the professional learning design needed to fit the work that teams were meant to do. The implementation of the model requires adaptive skills to build relationships across hierarchical lines. The professional learning for ART Directors began with a session on "*How to enter schools.*" Eventually, the professional development plan would contain many elements like SCARF threats, the ladder of

inference, *The Coaching Habit*, and immunity to change (BillT, Mind Tools Content Team, & Asecade). These seemed to be the learnings most beneficial as teams worked to move from an authoritarian, prescriptive stance to a collaborative one. *See Appendix E.*

Throughout the first two months of the Senior Director's tenure, I wrestled with beliefs and principles that were counter to the project's mission. For weeks we would talk about how to do professional learning, what ART was meant to do, and ways to continue the project. Even the best-laid plans must adjust. Therefore, the session on December 4, 2019, was the last I chose to lead for ART Directors. I stopped doing learning sessions for the Directors and focused on working with the Directors who showed interest in adaptive leadership. The professional learning sequence was soon renamed "Old Professional Learning Scope and Sequence." From there, all the learning that ART Directors received was directly aligned to current initiatives in the system – instructional leadership framework, ESSA, and the supportive environment framework.

When I realized that our visions for ART were not aligned, there was a new member added to the Central ART. At this time, I knew that in order to continue to influence the project, I needed to work another angle. I began a gradual transition to a consultant role on the project. I advised from my positional authority, but moved away from interfacing with the Senior Director daily. We set up weekly check-ins, where I required an agenda and content ahead of the meeting time. When I could sense that the Senior Director was not proactive, I activated the immediate supervisor through meetings and email correspondence.

By January 29, 2020, I transitioned the responsibility for ART and most workflows to the Senior Director and two team leads, assuring that there was a plan to continue the work and an implementation guide for the ART in the field. Additionally, all ART across the City were equipped to continue the work with a detailed implementation guide. I continued

to support the Central ART with visional direction, strategic planning and follow-through on any direct asks of the First Deputy Chancellor. I scheduled sustainability meetings and provided recommendations for iterations of the project directly to the Senior Director. To continue seeding the context-driven vision, I coached and supported three ART Directors in the field with immunity to change and teaming support.

Evidence to Date

Launching and leading Academic Response Teams offers insight into how context can be used to drive school improvement. Equally, the teams' work illuminates residue from our collective past and shows how deeply entrenched antiquated ideologies can be in mature institutions. Within the bounds of the 10-month residency, early evidence suggests that ART agitate and make progress by literally picking at the validity of our system's decisions. In this section, I attempt to anecdotally provide evidence of the strategic project's reach, acceptance and implementation, aligned to what I set out to do.

In some ways, my strategic project had two parallel sets of actions happening concurrently. The first track was the strategic design – designing how the teams would work, monitoring their progress, troubleshooting issues and socializing their methods at the system level. The other part of the strategic project was supporting and monitoring the actual actions taken by the teams citywide. I drove both of these. Consequently, I present evidence that is aligned to the impact and development of ART in two streams: Central Office and ART in borough offices. In each case, I present the data as it exists aligned to the goals of the project, underpinning philosophy and intended impact.

Central Office

Comprehensive School Support

Comprehensive School Support (CSS) was still taking shape when I entered residency. There were budding ideas and elements; however, the different programmatic components, metrics, actions and activities had yet to be developed. In order for me to influence the shape and direction of CSS, I needed to be a part of the foundational iterations of the work. My inclusion served two purposes. The first was that I was able to assess how leaders were naming the mechanisms – actions and activities – that made up the strategy. The second reason was that I could help shape the ideology behind the strategy in alignment with ART.

In collaboration with the OFDC Chief of Staff, I wrote the first public-facing iteration of a definition for CSS. The definition was used by Chancellor Carranza in a Back to School Meeting of nearly 2,000 principals in August 2019. It reads:

At the core of our system-wide comprehensive school support (CSS) strategy is ensuring that schools have the tailored supports needed to meet the identified goals of their comprehensive educational plans (CEPs) that drive toward improving student outcomes.

Comprehensive school support is a strategy, not a program; CSS is an approach that aligns support and supervision while ensuring strategic and targeted feedback to accelerate learning and instruction. Using this comprehensive strategy, schools will receive:

- *Feedback and differentiated supports aligned to demonstrated needs that help schools realize their goals and objectives.*
- *Continuous feedback through ongoing progress monitoring and cycles for continuous improvement.*
- *Supports to address disproportionality in student performance and continue to set high expectations for all students*

Having influenced the definition of CSS as articulated here, I was able to more coherently ideate upon ART's approach, scale, socialization and capacity. Having focus and boundaries was helpful because at the time I was doing the work of five people. Designing, leading and implementing ART was a full act of visioning, planning, leading and executing all

at once. Having such strong influence created more favorable conditions to move the project forward.

One of the primary criteria for success was whether I would be able to entirely create and team a Central ART that could do all of the work that I was doing. I was able to mostly transition the vision and operations to the Senior Director of ART. Improvement science ideology, professional learning and core relationships that were driving ART in its infancy did not transition to the Senior Director well. I will discuss the reasons for this in the analysis.

Relationships in OFDC

In order to lead ART and make it real, I had to gain autonomy. Verbally, the First Deputy Chancellor gave me the project. However, one colleague in our office held all of the files and templates from Boston and Brooklyn South as well as some political strings to make ART a priority on the full list of things OFDC had to do. Weekly, I would ask to meet. I asked for anchoring documents in an effort to speed up the work; however, it felt like the work was being intentionally stalled. Timing is often everything, so I worked hard not to take the stall personally. Two critical conversations shifted Academic Response Teams after I came to understand the stall.

The first was a direct conversation with my colleague. While on a school visit with the First Deputy Chancellor, I noticed that information that I was inquiring about for weeks suddenly appeared in my Google Drive. It was not only the information I had requested, but it was already translated for implementation in New York City. Logos in the presentations and documents were changed, but there was not much attention given to the specific dynamics of New York City context – unions, workload, supervision or timing. I

immediately gave the person a call and said, “It seems that you have a vision? In the future, just let me know that you have it so that I’m not bothering you about it.” The response was, “Yes, my bad, I just haven’t had time to do anything.” This conversation was fruitful because it opened a door for an authentic and positive working friendship that I am incredibly grateful for.

My colleague was preparing for a conference call to introduce ART to the field. I thought that I would be a part of this; however, two specific colleagues designed the call, and I was a participant. These colleagues had not led a school or groups of schools and were not delivering the information in a way that reflected the intricate inner workings of the larger system. I decided to listen to the call on my way home. The call did not go as anticipated, and left some in the field confused about the direction of the teams. There were inconsistencies, unclear directives and a general lack of clarity. The First Deputy Chancellor was on the call and immediately let us know that the call was not going as planned. Standing inside of Atlantic Terminal, I decided to give her a call. I explicitly asked the First Deputy Chancellor for the reins of the project. She gave me the responsibility and had conversations with my colleagues. I was granted autonomy.

ART in the BCO

Small Change is Change

Academic Response Teams in the Borough Central Offices made changes for schools. While all of the changes cannot be attributed to ART-- because of other improvement variables in the system -- there is early evidence indicating the influence and impact of ART.

For example:

- At 00K000 the ART's aim was to develop a protocol for looking at student work to differentiate instruction on the kindergarten team. Results from the student work analysis protocol used student grouping to drive differentiation, and the creation of sight word walls based on students' needs. As a result, student sight word recognition and sentence formation increased 75% within the two kindergarten classes from September to November.
- At 00K001, the ART's aim was to assist the school in providing students frequent opportunities to extend their writing and to deepen their thinking by asking high-level questions of each other and their teachers during instruction. Using 1st grade as an example, writing increased due to a decrease in usage of picture boxes, where appropriate. A 90% increase in student writing score can be seen in their writing rubric score from September to November.
- At 00X000, the ART's aim was to decrease the number of Level 3, 4 & 5 incidents by embedding structures for increased communication among school stakeholders. The school experienced an 8% decrease in Level 3, 4 & 5 incidents compared to the same time period during the 2018-19 school year.
- At 00X001, the ART's aim was to establish consistency across the science department in implementing ENL strategies to foster language acquisition by using a Marzano vocabulary strategy and reaching a consensus on three out of the six steps to implement during instruction. When we monitored the tested change idea, we collected evidence of student work, in which at least 90% of the students created a visual representation of the target vocabulary word and used the target word verbally and in writing.

These quick wins for Academic Response Teams were remarkable. In all, schools engaged by ART received between 19 and 35 touch points as a result of the initiative. Everyone was not excited, however. In conversations with non-ART leaders in several borough offices, I learned that the borough-based ART exhibited behaviors that were seen as counter-cultural and ultimately threatening. First, a Director of School Improvement spoke about how there was a general feeling that ART was “elevated” above all other improvement work. The pedestal created resentment in this person and others in the borough office because of his more favorable characterization of and relationship to the former Renewal Program. Others in the office also experienced resentment because they applied for the team and were not chosen. It should also be noted that the regular changes in the Central Office created emotional and psychological scars that often materialized in resistance to change or non-commitment.

In another borough office, the ART was never in the office. The ART was in schools Monday through Thursday, causing running jokes on my days at that office. Staff throughout the office would pop into the ART's room to comment on the fact that they had unnecessarily designated space because they were "never at work."

Finally, at least two of the borough ART Directors were hired from outside of the system. Their leadership styles and approaches showed that they were not fully developed in the NYC DOE. Their lack of insider status posed a significant threat and created dissension, resulting in internal colleagues attempting to discredit these leaders or sabotage their efforts.

Supporting State-Designated Schools

Academic Response Teams were intended to serve schools in danger of slipping into state designation; however, teams were not deployed in this way in every catchment area. One Executive Superintendent decided to deploy ART into state-designated schools only. These are schools that are at risk of state receivership. Typically, state-designated schools suffer from long-standing inequities that materialize into a concert of school-based issues: chronic absenteeism, high teacher turnover, low enrollment and low student achievement.

The ART that serviced only state-designated schools faced a severe conundrum. Cycle one was very challenging for this team. The first challenge was that the newly formed group of people did not yet work as a team. This challenge was complicated by the fact that their ART Director was a former school receiver and had never built teams. Also, several ART Specialists in the group were previous principals and struggled to work with others in a collegial capacity. Used to positioning themselves as authoritative, the team had a tough time adjusting to a collaborative stance with one another and a coaching stance with the schools. Along with the problematic teaming dynamics at play, the team was also being pushed into some of the most difficult schools in the state.

A second challenge was that this team was never seen as a supportive mechanism. The schools that the Executive Superintendent selected for this team were inundated with a barrage of state visits, evaluations and disconnected interventions. Adding in the ART did not help. In conversations with the ART Director and a principal at one of the schools, ART felt like a form of surveillance. The principal felt threatened. The principal felt as if their supervisors were spying on their work through the ART. The principals were not wholly incorrect. A central goal of ART was to link support with supervision. This happened through a series of conversations that would happen before the ART engaged in the school community. Specifically, the Executive Superintendent was given explicit guidance to engage local Community Superintendents ahead of engaging principals in order to be more inclusive and texturize contextual understanding for the ART. However, this Executive Superintendent chose not to engage the Community Superintendent, thereby creating the dynamic that ART hoped to avoid.

Conditions for Leadership

One Academic Response team was successful because of the conditions created by the inclusive nature of the Executive Superintendent. The ART Director in one borough office was directly introduced to Community Superintendents by the Executive Superintendent. The ART Director was included in progress monitoring meetings and incorporated into the overall school improvement structure of the borough office. In this case, the Academic Response Team was more coherently blended into the culture, routines and habits of the office. ART met with other units in the office and provided insight into supports that could be deployed by human resources, student support services or even transportation. Being that the ART was well-versed in the community conditions at the school level, the Executive Superintendent's actions positioned the ART Director and the

team to lead from an informed and diplomatic stance that created value in the borough office.

This particular team had significant buy-in from Community Superintendents, thereby making almost all of their ART engagement positive. The ART Director of this team is an expert in improvement science and used relative risk ratios for subgroups as a driver in school selection and ART engagement. As a result, the Action Plans created by this team showed evidence of inclusive leadership and pure improvement science. Further, the Action Plans were indeed a co-construction between the ART, Community Superintendent, principal, and local school community. Community Superintendents were included in the task and were a part of assuring that Action Plans were aligned to the school's goals and set realistic measures of success within the allotted engagement period. In this borough office, supervision, and support were linked to the community context and aspirations.

An examination of one Action Plan from this team shows a clear articulation of exactly what the teams would be working on in the cycle and connected to broader goals in the borough. The principal was included in creating the plan and seems to have provided a launchpad for the work. Specifically, the principal's recommendation of surveying teachers added a layer of inclusion. The principal wanted to include teachers in the work that ART would do. Therefore, he asked that ART survey the teachers in order to identify areas that the school community was interested in working on. As a result, the Action Plan displays how the ART observed classes in action and instructional leadership meetings, and worked to align ART engagement to the collective wishes of the school. This Action Plan shows that the improvement work was grounded in the lived experiences of teachers and leaders in the community.

While the aforementioned is true, the Action Plans from this team consistently did not show articulation of measures that would show the impact of the engagement period. A copy of an Action Plan from this team is in *Appendix F*.

Analysis

“When you have mastered numbers, you will no longer be reading numbers, any more than you read words when reading books. You will be reading meanings.” – WEB Du Bois

Academic Response Teams have been primarily successful throughout the City. The aforementioned evidence supports elements of my theory of action and serves to name some of the complexities in the New York City context. New York City is one of the most diverse and densely populated cities in the world. Its school system is massive in scale. The Department has nearly 180,000 employees who serve students with disabilities, children of millionaires, homeless students and even adult students up to age 80. To make sense of the full charge of ART, a few additional numbers matter. There are nearly 115,000 homeless students in New York City public schools, 85% of which identify as Black or Hispanic (At 114,000, the number of homeless NYC students remains stubbornly high, n.d.). Also 73% of students in the City are economically disadvantaged (DOE Data at a Glance, n.d.). Academically, 47% of students citywide are proficient in English language arts.

To policymakers, these may simply look like numbers, but to practitioners and implementers these numbers represent the variables that must be considered when operationalizing equity at scale. The numbers represent stories of individual schools, neighborhoods, communities and futures. For this reason, the approach taken by ART is as imperative as it is fragile.

Throughout the city, ART met great success and in record time; however, it was not without challenge. Competing interests and priorities within the New York City Department of Education often led to strategic diversions, roadblocks and even full stop throughout the

design, launch and implementation of ART. Major transitions throughout the agency, widespread media frenzy and the organization's addiction to speed situate the strategic project within a peculiar space and time. My reflection and analysis are focused on the core dynamics that the project encountered.

I. Power Matters

From my previous time in the New York City Department of Education, I was familiar with the role of power in the organization. In residency, I was seated at the top of the agency with significant access to the thought leaders and ideological negotiations that became policy. While this was very important and gave me positional authority, it was insufficient if I wanted to attempt operationalizing equity through Academic Response Teams. I needed power.

Power in the NYC DOE is generated through the creation and exchange of information. Most relationships serve as transactions where constituents trade one set of information for another. When I entered residency, the First Deputy Chancellor and her Chief of Staff downloaded important information to me quickly. I was made aware of the critical projects and relationships and pushed into important meetings immediately. Also, the almost immediate transition of the Senior Executive Director of Continuous Improvement gave me significant space to exercise leadership in crisis. For these reasons, I was doing a bit of everything in my first 10 weeks of residency: designing professional learning, writing public and internal-facing documents, crisis responses and advising. I could have continued on this path for all of the residency and ended up with no strategic project.

Leveraging the trust and credibility I gained in the reorganization, I asserted my leadership by focusing on what I know well: school improvement. I was reluctant to take on

this project because one of my goals in residency was to avoid the inertia of the agency. I did not want to slip into old habits of putting out fires and lose sight of strategy. However, enacting ART seemed small enough and impactful enough to operationalize equity. It was not easy to take the full reins of the project, however.

One way of creating value and power in an information-driven culture is to create information (Pfeffer, 1992). Resources attached to ART were valuable to both the First Deputy Chancellor, City Hall, and the system at large. Because very little existed, I had a large amount of discretion in an uncharted, niche area. Before I could do anything, I needed a full release from actors in the Office of the First Deputy Chancellor, who posed a threat to reimagining of the project. For the project to take off in short order, I had to have space to vision, research and strategize with minimal influence from competing priorities and agendas. I struggled with this because I could not figure out why the actors were not releasing the project to me, despite a direct ask from the First Deputy Chancellor.

Creating information was essential to moving the project forward; however, it would be useless without one essential resource – relationships (Pfeffer, 1992). Naturally, I began to think that the team did not trust my ability to do the work. It was also possible that I downplayed my professional accomplishments and personal capacities. I knew that my assumptions were not true because I was trusted with information, ideas and problem-solving very early. The First Deputy Chancellor and others in the organization said to me explicitly, “People respect you here.” In large, interdependent, complex systems like the NYC DOE, it is difficult to get things done by yourself (Pfeffer, 1992). Any resources I would be able to design, influence or lead would require credibility and a complete authorizing environment. I needed to figure out how to create value for myself as well as my colleagues.

The leadership for ART sits in one of OFDC's teams. This team is led by the Senior Executive Director and monitored by the Director of Organizational Effectiveness. These are the individuals that I worked most closely with, and who would stand to benefit if and when the project was successful. Developing trusting professional relationships with these two colleagues was critical. They would come to be two of my most prized relationships in the office.

I set up regular check-ins with each of them. I also pushed in on other projects and things that they were working on to create more value across the office. I began attending the weekly sub-team leadership team meetings and working closely with other sub-teams within the office. I supported anywhere that I could. I learned more about all of the workstreams, the expertise in personnel, how equity looked in action, conceptions of success, interconnections in workstreams and pain points in the office. All of the knowledge I gathered and projects that I contributed to supported the development of ART. ART were eventually erected with small conceptual connections to other strategic processes in OFDC. The strategic project developed credibility quickly because of my relationship to other work in our purview. ART became a core element of the Comprehensive School Support strategy, but largely moved across the City as an insular, innovative way to think about school support.

II. Unlearning

Knowing and understanding how power is gained and shifts in the organization helped me to not only accurately map relationships but to also think through the strategic leadership required to stand up a minimum viable project.

The First Deputy Chancellor was critical in supporting me to develop a relationship with each of the Executive Superintendents. On my second day of residency, she invited me to

attend the Executive Superintendent Retreat. Soon after, I began supporting with facilitation, meeting agendas, the arc of learning and weekly communications. I visited Executive Superintendents at their offices and learned about their leadership through our interactions.

Ahead of launching ART, there was a lot of confusion because many of the teams were hired, but there was not a clear process for the teams to follow. I stepped up and took the lead by calling each of the ART Directors. I learned about how they came to the work and their intentions in their new roles. Most importantly, the teams were very committed to equity in their catchment area, loyal to their Executive Superintendents and clear about how they would work to elevate context as the driver for their school-level support. Executive Superintendents echoed their sentiment and were very excited to have a new, handpicked team that could mobilize their vision for school improvement in their catchment area.

As I engineered the bare bones of ART, I encountered many people in the agency who wanted to know “how to do it.” As the project launched, conversations and surveys consistently showed that people involved in the project wanted more than just guidance. Often, ART Directors and Specialists wanted clear directives. They would say:

- “I want to make sure I’m doing this right.”
- “If I’m going to be responsible for this part of the work then I want to make sure that I am doing this the right way.”
- “The document that was shared which I thought was a post cycle summary sheet. It is confusing and I am unclear about its use.”
- “A good deal of things but that is ok. We learn as we go.”
- “More specific guidance on next steps such as the sustainment plan template. It would also be even better if official policy decisions such as the sustainability plan and end of cycle report being the same document are shared in an official manner. During the meetings, sometimes things are said that are policy decisions. However, sometimes it appears they are shared in response to a question or discussion rather than an official position.”

Working with ART Directors across the boroughs, I noticed that many were used to being provided with direction and complying. I noticed it most in those who were previously

New York City principals. They wanted to clear everything with the Central Office before taking any specific actions. I thought about this quite a bit. Namely, I recalled being much like this during my previous time in the system. Compliance and fluency in the language of the latest initiatives were often rewarded, and still is.

The fact of the matter is that the ART Directors experienced a sense of risk (Bryk, 2015). ART were being tracked by not only the Directors' immediate supervisor but also by the OFDC and City Hall. The spotlight made the project high stakes, thereby elevating risk and discouraging vulnerability (Bryk, 2015). ART reached deeply into the day-to-day work lives of teachers, principals and other educators in the system (Bryk, 2015). Directors and school-based educators were being asked to shift from a directive support paradigm to an inclusive, context-driven, coaching stance. It also requires that one invokes some amount of improvisation. The affordance of such professional latitude was not something that they were used to. Such a shift requires vulnerability; however, the power and accountability mechanisms in the system do not lend themselves to the psychological safety that the ART Directors needed.

After many interactions similar to these, I began to think more deeply about the power of unlearning. Unlearning literature asserts that routines have ostensive and performative components. The ostensive refers to the schematic parts of a routine – processes, templates, databases or tools. Performative components of routines are the behaviors and specific actions taken by individuals in an organization (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). These components are closely related and attention to both parts is necessary in the process of unlearning. Often the ostensive change should lead to a performative change; however, it is not always the case.

Conceptually, ART was showing up as an ostensive change within the system, merely a change in the process. However, the hope was that the ostensive change would activate the value system of the ART personnel. Given their collective interest in the Chancellor's priorities and decreasing inequity, the process of elevating context exposed a need for more adaptive leadership skills. Insofar as the non-human elements changed, the human element of the project maintained previous paradigms because training and orientations to ART and the Comprehensive School Support strategy failed to include explicit unlearning. Learned behavior and imprints often persist through environmental changes and are often more influential in sensitive times of transition (Stinchcombe, 1965).

The unlearning imperative also became apparent in other instances. The fact that an Executive Superintendent chose only state-designated schools, excluded Community Superintendents and further exhausted resources on the lowest-performing schools only is evidence that a deficit-based mindset was still pervasive even in the implementation of ART. Mature organizations tend to revert to old routines, thereby making the institutionalization of new ideas incredibly difficult (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Additionally, the fact that such actions were allowed, despite the Comprehensive School Support strategy, served as additional evidence of not only Renewal residue, but also an unclear strategy.

While the statement of a new strategy or approach to school improvement is straightforward, the elimination of the old methods from human storage bins is not neat and tidy (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). ART as a component of the Comprehensive School Support strategy is an example of an episodic change. It is vast in scope and initiated from a high level in the organization. The change started with revising the ostensive (tools, process, templates, etc.) aspect of a routine, and was followed by corresponding adjustment in the performative aspect (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Such change is difficult in mature organizations

because unlearning and relearning at the paradigmatic level is often carried out by managers identified by others within the organization who also carry old dominant routines as their dominant decision-making frame (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Many managers see their security in the unchanged routines, in part because their authority gained legitimacy by using them (Tsang & Zahra, 2008).

In a mature organization like the NYC DOE, many behaviors and habits are ossified (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Employees have completed the same tasks for years and have been rewarded for their behaviors. For this reason, they often see change as disruptive. Additionally, they have experienced harm from change and therefore find themselves less inclined to enthusiastically participate in change initiatives.

Often, inertia is also stronger in crisis-driven environments like the NYC DOE. As crisis or uncertainty intensifies, the rigidity of beliefs intensifies, limiting the agency's creativity (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Leaders at every level play into the familiarity trap, often preferring tried and true methods over anything new (Deloitte, 2015). They do what they know and avoid what they do not know. In the strategic project, the familiar is what reorients this school improvement toward the status quo, particularly when leaders decide to prolong support, only support "failing" schools or fail to be inclusive of local leadership.

The rubber meets the road when we believe that we are working to eradicate inequity. The age of the organization is significant because it gives rise to ossified routines in the organizational memory (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). New York City public schools began in 1805 (McCarthy, 2019). Notably, the purpose of the agency during its establishment was remarkably different from the equity agenda of the agency in 2020. Efforts to create equitable schools require significant unlearning at the organizational and individual levels. Insofar as we make small changes to increase equitable conditions, there remain individual

and institutionalized behaviors that unconsciously reinforce oppressive, deficit-based structures.

Strategy and structural abandonment do not naturally create unlearning or discard old habits. People can become resentful and find ways to act out, sabotage or avoid work. When erecting ART, I most often encountered what Zahra calls survival anxiety (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). My onboarding of the Senior Director made this clear to me. I was consistently dismissed and avoided. My motives were questioned when he asked “What’s your endgame?” At one point in an email message, the Senior Director inquired about the length of my tenure as “the intern,” wondering how much longer he would have to deal with me. I was almost incessantly questioned with “Are you my boss?” During a change process within a crisis-driven organization, such behavior is not uncommon (Tsang & Zahra, 2008).

Insofar as ART was envisioned as a way to incubate talent and use context to drive school support, the project is embedded in a tightly interwoven tapestry of learned behavior, change initiatives and institutional memories over time. In order for ART to be effective at supporting schools using contextual-fit supports, their work must rest in shared knowledge, dispositions and conceptions of leadership. The optimal performance of ART also requires leadership that deliberately unpacks human storage bins that do not support change because the force of the status quo is strong.

III. Context Matters

Often schools receive pre-packaged solutions that are inconsistent with the expressed needs of the students, teams, local capacity and communities. Therefore, from the start, Academic Response Teams were counterintuitive to traditional support methods. Not only is the initiative meant to create unique co-constructed interventions for each school, but ART is also meant to engage quickly and leave.

ART implement a context-based model of school improvement by triangulating satellite, map and street-level data to develop a robust picture of a school's state (Safir, 2017). There are a few reasons that this was disruptive. The first is that the Central Office gives orders to schools. The orders are created at the systems level and rolled out to schools. The most current data used to make decisions is often summative data, complaints that come through elected officials or alerts through the city's high-profile warning systems. I knew that it was a precarious task to center co-construction in the NYC DOE because there was the potential of discrediting expertise at the Central level, eroding trust in leadership and short-circuiting evaluation systems. However, it was more important to make sure that ART provided contextually-fit support and interventions. Such action was at the expense of my full knowledge that the inertia of the status quo could creep in at any moment.

Context matters because the vast variability across schools in the NYC DOE is astounding. It remains unclear to me if decision-making at every layer of the system considers these broad facts. Nevertheless, the fates of urban schools and communities are inextricably linked; therefore, our decision-making should behave as such (Green, 2015). Early movements in Black education valued principals as the connector to the community. In fact, educational leadership that links schooling with notions of community development was common practice for Black principals before *Brown v. Board* (Green, 2015). Research that followed decades later named the principal as the unit of change in schools; however, much of school improvement still excludes principals from the planning of support or interventions. Therefore, the role of ART is to address inequity and disproportionality by being inclusive of the recipient of the intervention and service.

ART work because they elevate the variability in context as the driver for improvement. Evidenced in both Action and Sustainability Plans, local leaders define their

problems and work to solve them by using local resources. The contribution of local leadership is essential because it not only solves a problem as local constituents see it, but it also spotlights a school community's capacity to fix their problems with the resources that they have. Further, working through the lens of improvement science, ART is a disciplined means to deliberately assemble educators to address context-specific problems and improve practice (Bryk, 2008). Once the educators are convened, improvement science offers an opportunity to deeply analyze the problems that they collectively aim to fix using a standard process. The standard process helps practitioners better address complex problems (Bryk, 2008). ART begin to move school support away from patchwork and catalyze real change across many dimensions.

Insofar as the aforementioned is true, evidence of ART's success is most prominent in borough offices, where there was improvement science infrastructure present prior to the inaugural cycle of ART. When this infrastructure was coupled with inclusive leadership by the Executive Superintendent, ART were more widely accepted into the leadership team of the borough office and, therefore, in schools and by Community Superintendents. Infrastructure refers to the concerted effort and alignment of macro-level central elements (governance, funding, legal, etc.), instructional elements (curriculum, teacher requirements, content frameworks, materials, assessments) and the social resources of instruction (teachers and leaders) (Cohen, Peurach, Glazer, Gates, & Goldin, 2014; Cohen, Spillane, & Peurach, 2018). Leveraging Cohen's assertion that when there is alignment between these core elements the conditions for success in public schooling is increased, I would argue that in borough offices where there was a moderate alignment of these levers (in middle-level leadership) it was possible to incubate an improvement strategy and set favorable conditions for impactful change.

Beyond alignment in infrastructure, borough offices where ART was successful also proved to have socialized normed language and practices about continuous improvement. In one borough, the ART Director had a different career path. This leader is a former principal in one of the 251 schools in the catchment area. The leader moved from the school to the borough office. Such a transition is not always smooth because many changes happen across hierarchical lines. As an ART Director, this leader has been successful for a few reasons. The first is that the leader is very personable, is a keen listener, and has an inspirational nature. Leading ART at the borough office served as a new opportunity for this Director to showcase her instructional agility and resilience in the face of the political challenges following a very difficult principalship.

A key element of alignment that contributes to the team's success is its connection to other personnel in the borough office. The ART Director is supported by an influential Director of School Improvement. The Director of School Improvement has supported the ART Director to organize the work in meaningful ways, cull the most critical data and act on the high-yield levers. The work of these dynamic leaders is complemented by the Executive Superintendent, who is a diplomatic high-achiever. The Executive Superintendent has a unique structure for analyzing data with the Community Superintendents and their teams, which enables the teams to keep a close pulse on changes throughout the 251 schools. Every month, the Director of School Improvement, ART Director, and the Executive Superintendent meet with Community Superintendent teams to analyze incoming data, track progress and align district-based actions to the overall strategy and goals of the catchment area. The momentum created by these leadership styles and data-driven actions are infrastructure for continuous improvement and allow ART to be more deeply situated in the context.

IV. Leadership Matters

Through the stories of the two borough offices, I learned the extent to which leadership matters. The most challenging part of this journey was managing the status quo's reappearance in language and behaviors of leaders who, with all great intentions, were advocating for change in marginalized districts and children in the system. Often, I watched well-meaning ideas go through a vetting process that stripped them of all innovative nature, reoriented them to the status quo and diminished impact on inequities. The Senior Director of Academic Response Teams taught me this lesson repeatedly.

Having written the job descriptions, envisioned the project's possibilities, and working so diligently to think through what ART could do for schools like those in Brownsville or East Harlem, I connected to a deeply personal purpose especially around what leadership should look like for the Central Team and leadership at the borough offices. However, momentum quickly shifted when the Senior Director arrived.

Given the newness of the project, the Senior Director's success in this new role would be dependent upon an ability to think proactively, act quickly, iterate fast, shift direction on demand and assure field-based personnel that everything would reach equilibrium. The Senior Director's leadership journey, style and archetype slowed the development, implementation and iteration of the project. After nearly 30 years in the agency in different capacities, including but not limited to principal, Director of Teaching and Learning, and School Quality Evaluator, this person saw this new position as the "culmination of all the work [they'd] done over their lifetime."

The more we worked together, the more I grew in admiration for the Senior Director. We became very close, sharing family pictures, childhood war stories, checking in over holidays and even sharing meals. I realized that the Senior Director was like many of

the leaders who raised me as an educator – committed, determined and steeped in roots connected to the African Diaspora. However, the leadership style was not precarious enough to rattle the oppressive skeleton of the status quo.

As I learned more, I came to understand the Senior Director’s deep belief in hierarchy created some of this dynamic. I understood why working with me was threatening, intrusive and, as once stated, “like working with [his] daughter.” With this understanding, I realized that I would not be able to push adaptive leadership or adult development in the professional learning sequence. In the Senior Director, I met the status quo, face to face. In all of the Senior Director’s beliefs about equity for the 72% of New York City students who are Black and Brown, the Senior Director had no idea that his role, too, was an instrument of oppression. I had to release the project or sacrifice myself. I let go, but I did not stop thinking about pathways to operationalize equity.

V. The Collision – Equity and Improvement Science

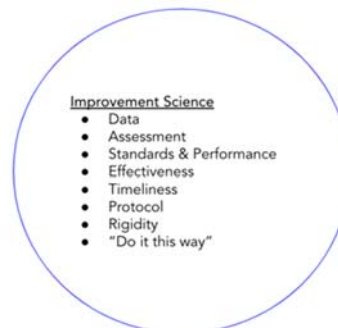
Status-quo approaches do not largely consider local context. This is what makes Academic Response Teams (ART) and the Comprehensive School Support strategy unique. Context can drive school improvement, but we need to consider how it intersects with some of our dominant mental models. I see context as sitting perfectly at the intersection of equity and improvement science, with context being the data (qualitative and quantitative) that creates the potential for equity.

Equity conversations are often about creating balance and including those who are marginalized or largely forgotten. Non-majority groups ask to be included and given space in hegemonic policies, celebrations or interventions. Educational equity conversations typically focus on creating opportunity for historically marginalized groups, having better access to advanced courses, addressing disproportionality in school discipline, narrowing academic

achievement gaps and accommodating those who have learning differences (English language learners, students with disabilities, etc.). People in dominant groups often experience loss when action is taken to increase equity. I see this as one side of a Venn diagram:

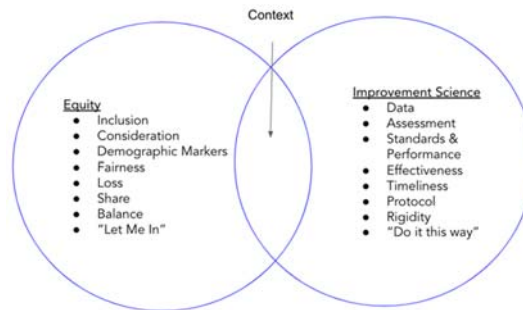


On the other side of the Venn diagram is improvement science, or for the purposes of this argument, it could even be popular approaches to school improvement. In the circle that represents this side of the Venn diagram, there is the following:



Improvement science anchors in data, performance and efficiency. Students' scores on summative assessments in aggregate determine the type of support that schools and districts receive. Generally, standards-based exams ask *all* students to perform at a certain level of proficiency in each grade level. Failing to meet the standards by way of student performance, not progress, leads to mandated interventions and support. Such interventions and support are generally matched to the performance metrics and all schools receive equal treatment under the policies and regulations that track student and system-level data.

Independently, these concepts are important to education; however, their intersection is equity in action. At the center, I see three operating questions that encompass both equity and improvement science:



(1) What does the context need – contextual fit? (2) What will we need to discard – unlearning? (3) How does the approach fit the systems’ aggregate narrative **and** match the history, values and aspirations of the local community – operationalizing equity?

Implications

In 1954, Dr. Horace Tate was named Principal of the Year in the state of Georgia. He was a published writer and accomplished leader, yet he longed for more. At the 1954 annual convening of the Georgia Teachers and Educators Association, Dr. Tate watched as the then-president passed the torch to his incumbent. He knew that it would be at least two more years before he could take the role of president. He watched as issues in Negro education were ignored, even after policies were in place. Local school boards would approve Negro school buildings, but the buildings would never come to be. There was no vocational training, no transportation, no federal aid to support equality (Walker, 2018).

Dr. Tate was a teacher who became a principal, agitator, advocate, and politician. I deeply identify with the fortitude of Dr. Tate. I hold a profound responsibility to those who have come before me, to remove barriers to make space for future generations. The feelings associated with such responsibility are ineffable. I have devoted my life to agitating on behalf

of my ancestors to make space for my descendants. Insofar as this is my driver, there are several implications for my future work.

Self

I entered the New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) in 2004 as a New York City Teaching Fellow. I was accepted after applying on the deadline and deciding to forego law school in pursuit of the two-year fellowship. I moved to New York with \$1,000 and a suitcase. I slept on the couch in the Pomonok Houses for \$100 per week. I ate canned tuna and dollar slices of pizza almost every day for a year. During the summer of 2004, I hustled every day on a 2.5-hour train-and-bus ride from deep in Queens to Brooklyn College. I did not know anyone. I took the first teaching job I was offered at Mary White Ovington I.S. 30 in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. I was the only Black teacher. I had no Black students. My Fellow Advisor told me, “You don’t belong there, but you’ll find your tribe.”

Before teaching saved my life, math did. So it was quite serendipitous for me to become a math teacher. I was not the teacher I would become for my first two years in Bay Ridge. I became a teacher when I found the Ronald Edmonds Learning Center in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. I was raised there. I learned to teach. I learned why teaching needed me. I learned why I needed teaching. I learned, as Du Bois stated, that “the most important thing for the existence of a people is the education of their children” (Dubois, 1935)” Khalek taught me because Catherine taught him. Therefore, it was only right that I teach Elacia, Jaden and Kiona.

Much like Dr. Tate, there came a day that teaching my students felt insufficient. Khalek left. He said, “Stay, the kids need you.” I stayed. Soon, I would run a math department of 17 teachers, all my senior. I look up to each of them. Mr. French, Mr. Alibi and Ms. Bruce. All my teachers. I was a teacher of teachers. I now needed to be a teacher of more. I left.

When the proposal to open and lead Vista Academy was approved in December 2012, I asked that it only be considered for particular context. Crown Heights, East New York, Brownsville. The model was designed to bring life to places where hope had been hidden, perpetually. We opened in Fall 2013. I became, in the words of Dr. Jeff Andrade, a Hope Dealer. A little hope goes a long way. A neighborhood is forever changed. Yet, this was not enough.

I left the New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) in June 2017. As a principal, I remember being overwhelmed with paranoia. I was either worried about losing my job or losing students. I did not know my value. Only when I arrived at Harvard did I realize that over the years my heart had grown just as callous as it was impassioned. For the first six months of Ed.L.D., I had to learn to trust people again. I had to understand who I was beyond being needed for emails, crisis management and meeting deadlines.

Returning to the New York City context for residency was a conscious decision. I chose this city. I believe in the leaders. I believe in the equity stance. I believed that I could take action on behalf of the community contexts that grew me, and I did.

Upon reflection, I see that I had covered my callouses in hope, only to re-experience perpetual disappointment in the behaviors and actions of those who are charged with developing people, advancing equity and acting on behalf of children. Hope-covered scars are the perfect incubator for disappointment. My emotions attached to advancing equity in New York City public schools are as personal as they are conflicted. Finding joy in the work is pushing through pain to understand that marginal change is, too, change. The tension that I am faced with begs of me to *protect my heart as an agent within the system.*

Inherently, this creates a tension that asks if I am a better actor within the system or adjacent to it.

The challenge that New York City represents is attractive. Power. Strategy. Transformation. I had access to the minds of leaders who truly believe in equity and improvement. I was able to work on their behalf. I cannot help but wonder how much more I could have accomplished had I demanded time or ruffled more feathers. Many times, I found myself playing small and staying safe. Often, I longed for the naiveté that made me more of a risk-taker. ***In leadership settings, I have often shrunk myself to make space for others. I am working with borrowed time. Dimming my light cannot sacrifice the work that must be done on behalf of children.***

As I ponder where I will be and what I will do, I remain resolved about who I will serve and show up for. Black and Brown children in New York City remain central to my mission.

Site

Strategize

Strategy - (noun) a plan of action or policy designed to achieve a major or overall aim. See also master plan, game plan, plan of action, blueprint, approach

The complexity of the New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) is astounding. There are years and years of entangled systems and structures that live in the people, the databases and mindsets. The dynamic created by the entanglement is much of the work that each administration encounters. This thrusts the agency's intellectual capital into crisis mode, incessantly. Additionally, given the pace of the system it is difficult to ideate and meticulously think simultaneously about rolling out policies and programs simultaneously. This interplay will never go away, and it is actually what makes working in the NYC DOE exciting. However, the crisis-driven culture can be diminished and deemphasized should the agency consider creating a specific group within the organization that operates as its strategy hub.

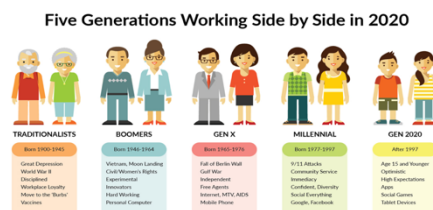
here was a strategy unit prior to the Carranza administration. The team operated from the Chancellor’s Office. In an effort to lean up the office and disperse decision-making across programmatic offices, this group was dismantled. Also, in their capacity as a strategy group, they primarily represented the interests and wishes of Mayor Bill de Blasio and City Hall, not necessarily the perspective of pedagogues and other educators.

The agency should consider creating a small team of strategists that function as the thinking collective for the greater organization. Such a team would be responsible for taking ideas developed in programmatic offices and pressure testing them for feasibility. The team should have about seven people and be composed of individuals who represent a cross-section of the many factions throughout the agency. The team should provide risk analyses, critical historical analysis, expected results, labor implications, concessions, alternatives to the original design and realistic timelines aligned to communications goals and the priorities of the Chancellor. The team will be able to do this within the culture of the agency if and only if it is division-agnostic, without allegiances or hierarchical ties to any division.

Hierarchy

“Consent is granted by the governed.” (Tsang & Zabara, 2008)

It is 2020. For a long time, sociologists and organizational leaders have anticipated how workforces would look this year. There are five generations in the workforce with Baby Boomers making up slightly less of the workforce than Millennials; however, their combination represents the majority of working people.



In the last seven to ten years, Millennials took the workforce by storm. Leaders across sectors were challenged by the perspectives, attitudes, dispositions and habits of this unique generation. There were many scholars, including Simon Sinek, who offered ways that the workforce could brace for impact in their organizations.

Each generation in our current workforce has a particular conceptualization of authority. There are those that prefer to work in environments where orders are given, hierarchy is clear and compliance is celebrated. Also, there are some who believe that hierarchy is imagined and only serves the powerful. The wherewithal of a leader to understand who they are and who they are working with is paramount in a market-driven human capital society. The site should heavily consider how this is playing out in the retention and exit of talent.

The agency should also design a clear strategy and set of core principles to center the quality and diversity of its workforce across a variety of demographic, skill and work experience markers. Additionally, the site should begin with activating accountability in two ways. One, begin taking disciplinary action on behaviors that are unbecoming of those in positional authority in more formal ways. Also, begin publicly rewarding those who have demonstrated desired behavior. Leverage the new relationship with Gallup to learn more about who works for the agency, who is leaving the agency and who stays with the agency. Work extensively to develop comparative analyses that quantify the return on investment of those who stay with the organization in high-salary, low-impact roles against those who depart the organization with relatively lower salaries and greater impact. These numbers should drive the human capital strategy internally as well as all labor negotiations and incentive programs. Finally, institutionalize intrapreneurship by grooming future leaders. Leadership development must move beyond pipeline creation that indoctrinates people into

obsolete behaviors of the organization and execute on forward thinking about the needs of children and families in the future. The agency must find clear and concrete ways to express value in people and their talent.

Prioritize Innovation

The word innovation was first recorded in the mid-1500s; however, since the year 1980 its usage has been on an uptick. The word is used in education with varied meanings. The connotations are endless and often refer to the use of technology.

Innovators as a leadership archetype are critical, conceptual, creative, reflective, visionary thinkers. Innovators' behaviors catalyze the creation of new ideas in a mature organization. Innovators understand problems well, clarify outcomes and outputs, understand iteration and use feedback to improve.

The supervisors of innovators are also unique. They embody skills combined with behavioral traits such as curiosity, resilience, the ability to collaborate and the development of both observation and communication skills. The NYC DOE should find concrete ways to reward the behaviors that innovators display.

The agency should seek to recruit, hire and retain the agency's human capital in alignment to the tasks they will be required to perform; however, this is especially true when hiring for roles that will create new workstreams or require innovative thinking that is countercultural to the agency's core practices. The agency should adopt ways to recruit for fit and consider how the personnel they hire signal agency-wide values and priorities to the greater organization. Consider how hiring people who have not been successful in their practice signals the agency's beliefs and values.

Find ways to incentivize innovation by encouraging a shift in how the organization rewards employee performance. Currently, the rewards and punishments throughout the

agency are clear. One is rewarded by being needed. One is punished by being abandoned. People are considered as a utility or non-utility. Consider thinking of ways that the culture can begin to reward those that find ways to exploit current systems in more efficient, novel and provocative ways. Consider hiring contrarians. The choirs of yes are in part a result of how the agency rewards behavior; therefore, when people experience the “social death” that comes as a result of disagreeing, consider calling them in.

Sector

Drive Reform with Context

Nearly 52% of all Black students in American public schools remain in schools that are at least 75% Black. Additionally, Black students in American schools are disproportionately over-disciplined, rarely receive grade-level assignments and are bombarded by systems of low expectations (The Opportunity Myth, 2018; Kuscera, 2014). Thus, there are achievement, expectation and opportunity gaps that plague the sector. The education of Black children has become conflated with low-income, underprivileged, inner-city, urban, students of color and much of the nuance has been lost.

Policy-making in urban centers like New York City requires a deep consideration for the conditions of communities. Context matters. Our reform efforts have altogether dismissed any nuance in school and community conditions at the local level, and have arguably created a hegemonic monolithic narrative about who comprises urban school systems, what their needs and capabilities are when in fact there is tremendous variability given recent trends in gentrification and immigration.

The ever-changing American landscape requires that we complicate the way we do school reform. This is critical in cities with mayoral control like New York, Chicago and Washington, D.C.. Mayoral control of schools should assure connections between critical

service agencies and bridge the divide between urban school reform and community development. Operationalizing equity means making strategic connections to localities in an effort to avoid disconnected policy.

In order to actualize on context-driven reform and support, the sector is in need of meaningful ways to gather contextual street-level data that minimizes bias, assures cultural sensitivity and centers the needs of communities over political interests. We must learn to embrace nuance and use it as a driver for differentiation, customization and precision in support for every level of the system. Current research in the use of context to drive education policy is limited.

Conclusion

Upon the completion of my residency, Academic Response Teams (ART) reached over 140 schools and nearly 80,000 students. The teams' success represents the budding capacity for large bureaucratic school systems to operationalize equity in service of narrowing disproportionality in academic performance, achievement gaps and opportunity gaps. Further, while ART serviced less than 10% of schools in NYC, the number of schools engaged by ART nears the total number of schools in Boston or Washington, D.C. ART's reach exceeds the number of schools in Detroit, Atlanta and Oakland. Therefore, large complex bureaucratic organizations can use school community context to design precise school support that is fit to local, individual school needs, but not without attention to a few factors.

The first is context. In fact, if we intend to shift the sector and be inclusive of those who have been traditionally overlooked, contextual-fit is one of the most critical factors in designing school supports and reforms. The nuances present at the local level present opportunities to make school improvement just. As a sector, we must avoid the common

practice of implementing fast and fixing later (Bryk, 2008). One way to remedy this is by elevating the voices of local leaders in school communities because failing to fully appreciate the significance of context has led good reforms to fail (Bryk, 2008). By including local leaders, ART were able to be more precise in their actions, efficient in their use of resources and build capacity for local leaders to sustain such catalytic interventions.

Next, ART exposed antiquated practices and mindsets that reinforce the status quo amid change. Equally, ART shows that the nation's largest school system is capable of operationalizing equity in direct opposition to such ideology. School improvement approaches that require serving only the failing schools and assign blanket, prescriptive supports are inefficient and insufficient for current students and those of the future. To mitigate this dynamic, unlearning is imperative.

A final critical learning from my strategic project is that organizational learning and change is almost always superimposed upon deeply held understandings and beliefs. Currently, practitioners at all levels are working to change practices and policies to create more equitable school systems with uneven success, and perhaps it is because we have not considered the role of unlearning. Often, we have failed to spend time deliberately unpacking the knowledge, habits, routines and ideologies that create the results we are working to eradicate.

Leading the design and implementation of Academic Response Teams, under the leadership of First Deputy Chancellor Cheryl Watson-Harris, showed me that system-level leaders can create conditions for success at the local level. The autonomy and agency I was afforded provided full gaze into the complexities of decision-making, and how the culture of an organization impacts even the most well-intentioned plans – especially when equity is the objective.

“ . . .at the core of equity: understanding who your kids are and how to meet their needs. You are still focused on outcomes, but the path to get there may not be the same for each one.” - Pedro Noguera

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Appendices

Appendix A:

Need	Does the intervention meet an identified need of the target population? The outcome of the intervention must be valuable to those delivering, supporting and receiving the intervention. Is there an advantage to this type of service above and beyond existing services?
Precision	The extent to which the core features of the intervention - what is to be delivered - are well defined.
An evidence base	What is the shared knowledge that is moving the work and what “research-based” practices are you using to ensure fit and precision
Efficiency	The intervention needs to be not only effective but practical.
Skills and Competencies	. . . clarity regarding how implementers will acquire skills to use an intervention as intended. The training, coaching, orientation and support needed for personnel to deliver the intervention should be clearly defined.
Cultural Relevance	An intervention should match the values and preferences of those who will implement the intervention, benefit from the intervention, manage and support the intervention. Personal, societal, cultural and professional values matter. The type of intervention, how it is implemented, and the intended outcomes should be acceptable to those in the local setting.
Resources	contextual-fit requires the ability and willingness to allocate the resources needed for both initial adoption and sustained implementation.
Administrative and Organizational Support	contextual-fit includes the values and preferences of those making administrative decisions.

(What Is Contextual Fit?, 2015)

Appendix B

BCO	ART Specialist Allocation by Proportion	ART Director
Affinity	3	1
Brooklyn South	5	1
Access	1	1
Queens North	2	1
Manhattan	6	1
Bronx	11	1
Queens South	7	1
Brooklyn North	10	1
Staten Island	0	1
Central	0	4
Total	45	13

Appendix C

ART Essentials

ART as a part of the comprehensive school support strategy allows for context-specific implementation. BCOs have a clear “way of doing business,” and ART is not meant to disrupt this. Below are the essential elements:

Pre-Engagement*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Meeting amongst ART/BCO staff to complete needs assessment ● Superintendent Engagement (possibly ES, ART Director, DSI, ED) ● Principal Engagement (possibly ES, ART Director, ED) ● Meeting with principal, Supt and ART team that will work with school ● Metrics for success (ES, ED, S, ART, Principal)
During Cycle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Six or more weeks ● Teams of two or more ● Names and roles of ART members who will work with the school ● Dates of cycle (days that the principal can expect the team) ● Itemized supports (focus area, the modality of support, etc.) ● Approval by the ART Director and Principal ● Mid-cycle reflections and feedback for course correction
Post-Cycle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Meeting with the principal to discuss the progress made and plan for sustainability ● End of Cycle Survey at the close of the cycle (provided by OFDC) ● Summative Report - template in development ● Sustainability Plan - template and contents in development
Sustainability Period	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Progress Meeting ● Progress Memo - contents in development

A note on record keeping:

Many teams have created some of these documents, and we can make samples available for use.

While we are leaving the format and contents for many of these documents to the discretion of the team, each of these components should be on file and available (electronically or otherwise) for review. Maintaining this information allows us to track the consistency of support and measure the impact of ART across schools. Additionally, following each interaction with a school, ART team members are expected to record their actions, observations, and next steps. Records for all interactions should be housed in a single place and available for review upon request.

SEND TO PRINCIPAL AND CC THE ES, SUPERINTENDENT, AND OTHER ART MEMBERS

Dear Superintendent _____

We are [insert BCO name] are excited about the launch of the Academic Response Teams!

I have identified schools in your district that would significantly benefit from the ART. We intend for ART to support your leadership by designing comprehensive, tailored supports aligned to your schools' CEPs, and matched to their demonstrated need. Our goal is to co-construct and implement differentiated supports that address disproportionality in student performance and support your leadership team in setting high expectations for all students.

The following schools in [District #] have been selected to participate in [cycle #]. Additionally, I have provided school DBNs and rationale for their selection below.

School	Rationale

Over the next few weeks the ART will be organizing with these principals to begin organizing and customizing support for these school communities. As they engage the school leaders, please keep watch for correspondence that will require your attention.

As a first step, ART will be scheduling phone conferences with principals to share more about ART as well as learn more about the schools and their perceived needs. Soon, we will schedule a collaborative meeting with you, our ART Director, and the principal. During this meeting, we will co-construct a set of supports and interventions that seem aligned to the school's unique context and their articulated CEP goals.

We look forward to working with you and your team as we launch ART!

Warmly

[ART TITLE]

ART Model Practices

DRAFT - PLEASE DO NOT CIRCULATE

ART, as a part of our approach to comprehensive school support (CSS), allows for the context-specific implementation of continuous improvement strategies. BCOs each have clear culture, practice, and tools for working with schools; ARTs work in coordination with these processes. There are some best and recommended practices for working with schools.

<p>School Selection</p>	<p>Executive Superintendents identify schools according to their knowledge of the schools’ CEP goals, school context and school needs, in consultation with the BCOs and superintendents (supts). Some trending characteristics of Cycle 1 schools are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● New Principal placement ● A decrease in Math/ELA scores in 2018-2019 ● Changes in enrollment demographics ● Historical knowledge of prior leveraged BCO/Superintendent/Central Office supports that would advance school progress. ● Changes in teacher staffing (i.e., new teacher increase)
<p>Pre-Engagement*</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ART Director engages the Principal to introduce ART, explain the ART residency/deployment process, understand key school context features and agree upon a meeting for the initial ART meeting at the school site. ● Initial ART Meeting with Principal, Supt and ART team that will work with school (group above consults to determine the number of attendees, length of stay, criteria for success and overall outcomes of the initial meeting) ● Collaboratively decide the tools that will be used to assess the baseline conditions of classroom practice and school environment throughout the ART cycle (Danielson, QR Rubric, instructional absolutes, etc.) ● Co-Constructed, ART drafts plan for ART engagement vetted and agreed upon by the Principal, Superintendent, Executive Superintendent, and ART Director ● Co-Constructed ART support plans are explicitly anchored in a school’s CEP goals ● Scheduling and calendaring will include vets around scheduled PPOs, QR visits, and any SED engagement.
<p>During Cycle Weeks 1 - 8 *max</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clearly define the number of weeks of ART Team Deployment ● Teams of two to four ART Specialists in a school at a time (unless otherwise agreed upon by the ART Director and Principal)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ART elicits feedback and updates Principal on progress, regularly. • Ongoing communications and alignment with other BCO staff, superintendent, and Executive Superintendent.
Post-Deployment Implementation Period Weeks 8-16 *max	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting with the principal to discuss the progress made and plan for implementation and sustainability • ART drafts, in collaboration with school leadership, an end of cycle summative document of services provided, reflections, impact and recommendations for sustainment • End of Cycle Principal Feedback Survey at the close of the cycle (provided by OFDC)
Sustainability Period	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progress Meeting with Principal to discuss available BCO supports or services for sustainability and concrete next steps for all key partners (ES, Superintendent, Principal, ART, BCO) • ART Progress Memo created by ARTs to capture current standing of school progress and continued BCO support opportunities • ART Directors are capturing learnings and reflections throughout the process to improve future cycles as part of collective continuous improvement. • Central DOE and CSA will come back together after the first cycle to reflect together.

SAMPLE Initial Principal Interview

Date Created:		Proposed Cycle Start Date:	
BCO:	ART Team:	ART Central Team Lead:	
Principal Tenure:		Principal Perceived Needs:	
Instructional Coaches:		Curriculum: Math - Science - ELA - SS -	
Common Plannings: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Math - frequency _____ • ELA - frequency _____ • Science - frequency _____ • ILT - frequency _____ • SPED - frequency _____ • SIT Team - frequency _____ • Guidance - frequency _____ 		Interim Assessments:	
Current Supports, Interventions and Partnerships:		Principal-Identified Strengths	
		Strengths/Leverage Points :	
		Principal's Current Initiatives:	
		Collect: via email <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monday PD Plan • Curriculum Documents • ILT Minutes or Agendas 	

Appendix D

Academic Response Teams (ART) Overview

Why ART?

The nearly 1,800 schools throughout the city have various identities and needs; however, they share one goal: maximize learning and advance the academic achievement of all students. Our school portfolio includes many school types; each of which is charged with providing an equitable and excellent education for every child, in every classroom, every day. As a part of the comprehensive school support (CSS) strategy, ART seeks to stabilize schools in danger of slipping into a state designation and accelerate the performance of those that are at the cusp of more significant improvement.

ART as a part of comprehensive school support (CSS)

At the core of our system-wide comprehensive school support (CSS) strategy is ensuring that schools have the tailored supports needed to meet the identified goals of their comprehensive educational plans (CEPs) that drive toward improving student outcomes.

Comprehensive school support is a strategy, not a program; CSS is an approach that aligns support and supervision while ensuring strategic and targeted feedback to accelerate learning and instruction. Using this comprehensive strategy, schools will receive:

- Feedback and differentiated supports aligned to demonstrated needs that help schools realize their goals and objectives.
- Continuous feedback through ongoing progress monitoring and cycles for continuous improvement.
- Supports to address disproportionality in student performance and continue to set high expectations for all students

Comprehensive, tailored supports will align to a school's CEP goals, leverage the Borough/Citywide Office staff who understand schools best, and tailor supports to match demonstrated need. Our goal is to work together to provide ongoing and continuous feedback to schools, differentiate support accordingly, and address disproportionality in student performance by setting high expectations for all students.

ART represents one of several approaches actualizing CSS.

What is ART?

Select schools will be supported by teams of experienced educators who will provide intensive, hands-on coaching of principals, school leadership, teacher leaders, and classroom teachers to improve professional practice and accelerate student learning. Each team will provide on-site support in rapid improvement cycles of 6-8 weeks, supporting capacity-building at schools through a gradual release model. Upon completion of the cycle, each school team, along with ART, will design and implement a post-support sustainability plan that is monitored over time.

ART will provide precise, on-demand support aligned to a school's CEP goals and the Chancellor's priorities. ART is a customized approach to deploying central resources in a

manner that advances equity, builds capacity and deepens partnership with school leaders and their communities.

ART Theory of Action

If Academic Response Teams, through non-evaluative capacity building 6-8 week support deployments and a shared school improvement framework utilize evidence-based strategies, empowering school leadership to develop staff capacity and strengthen cycles of continuous improvement whereby school staff:

- Identify the needs of their school community
- Develop a strategic action plan aligned to the school improvement framework that addresses their needs
- Utilize high quality, tiered, evidence-based strategies aligned to their strategic action plan
- Engage in regular monitoring to assess the impact of their plan in meeting their needs
- Demonstrate their capacity to continuously adjust their plan to ensure that their school community's needs are met and equity is advanced

Then New York City public schools that are engaged by Academic Response Teams will experience significant improvement and be on track to become more equitable educational institutions that narrow the opportunity gap for students.

Enacting CSS: What types of schools receive ART Support?

Beyond our lowest performance/capacity schools and schools of SED designation, there are 583 schools, or 36%, categorized as low-medium performance/low-medium capacity. These are schools that have stagnating growth, yet show the greatest promise for improvement

ART is designed to provide direct and targeted support to schools that have the greatest propensity to either (1) improve and accelerate out of low/medium performance range into high performance, or (2) regress into low performance and SED designation without targeted support. ART will be based within Borough/City Offices (BCO), and will primarily focus on the following:

- Actively and strategically working toward CEP goals
- Building capacity at the school level
- Supporting the interpretation and implementation of external feedback to schools
- Fast-track the conditions for coherent instructional practice
- Leverage existing school support structures
- Enhance the coordination of school supports at central and BCO level
- Optimize resources through flexible deployment methods that put the resources where they are most needed

How will ART look?

There will be a Central based ART as well as teams at the Borough Central Offices (BCO). Central teams will be responsible for driving the vision of ART as it moves throughout the BCOs and schools. The Central ART Team will lead the strategy, professional learning, implementation, evaluation and day-to-day operations of the BCO based teams.

In collaboration with the Principal, borough-based ART Teams will focus on supporting schools through an inquiry-based, problem-solving process that results in customized support for each of the ART schools.

High-Level Timeline:

Summer 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Staff all Central and Borough-based ART positions• Identify ART schools and notify ART Schools
September - November 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mobilize ART in designated schools• Check-in on ART progress and Metrics with CEP Progress Monitoring dates
December - February 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Principal Roundtable• Support designing Sustainability Plans• Launch new ART cycles
Spring 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ART after-action review and design refinement

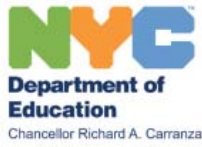
Appendix E

ART Leadership Development and Professional Learning

Summer/Fall 2019		
Date	Content	Pre-work for Next Meeting
10.2.2019	Engaging schools: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ART Overview • Creating a container for trust ART Norms & Pre-Entry Protocols Launching a Cycle - Case Study <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning a cycle • Approval of cycle 	Ladder of Inference
10.10.19	Zoom Call: Positive Entry into schools	
10.23.19 Noon-4pm	Coaching in the Emergency Room - Atul Gawande SCARF Threats Ladder of Inference	Follow-Up Handout SCARF: A Brain-based model for collaborating and influencing others Next Time: Psychological Safety
11.13.19	Led by Clarence at Brooklyn North Agenda	
11.20.19	ILF at Court Square in LIC	
11.26.19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cycle 2 Guidance • End of Cycle Wrap 	Phone call that encompassed reading, explaining and acquiring feedback on the
12.4.19	All Directors Meeting at Brooklyn Marriott <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Framework for Teaming • Framework Introduction & Process • ART Vision and Calendar to Date and a look ahead • Sustainability Plans 	
12.11.19	CANCELLED	
1.6.20	ILF Training	

1.15.20	Sustainability Plans Cycle 2 Schools Consultancy: Caron Pinkus	
1.29.20	Impact Day at Tweed	
1.12.20		
2.12.20		
3.11.20		
3.25.20		
5.13.20		
5.27.20		
6.24.20		
<p>More Considerations: HF SEF LASW Protocol Heat Maps UpLearning Organizing to learn Being Meeting Wise Humble Inquiry 15 Leadership Actions Learning Orientation vs Performance Orientation Facilitative Leadership For JoAnn – How do you want to set these meeting dates? Do you want them aligned to anyone? Think about using the DW Norms and maybe including a couple extras. Divide ART Leads to specific ES – Bronx is the only one and others would double up (maybe) Compass points Ladder of inference Positive entry to school buildings MBTI SCARE DDO Stuff Relational Coordination The Coaching Habit In the Box Pinch Sort SBI Consultancy</p>		

Appendix F



Detailed Action Plan

School Name: MS XX (00x000)
11/22/19

Date:

Problem of Practice				
<p>In collaboration with the leadership team, and teachers it was identified that the schools problem of practice is in developing and implementing effective strategies for ENL students that lead to greater achievement, and language acquisition in science classes.</p> <p>This problem of practice aligns to the Bronx Goal #2, which is Strengthening Social-Emotional Learning & Culturally Responsive Environments.</p>				
Theory of Action				
<p>TBD</p> <p><i>*Support staff members include attendance teacher, Deans, guidance counselors, school aides, and social workers.</i></p>				
Action Step	Point Person	Benchmark	ART Support	Progress
Based on principal recommendation on 10/30/19 we administered a survey for the staff in which they were able to identify areas they felt the school community and themselves needed assistance in.	Principal XXXX	n/a	J. D. A. K. R. N.	31 staff members participated in the survey. On 11/12/19 we meet with Principal Franklin and her instructional team to discuss the survey results. It was decided that the ART area of focus would be ENL support for science teachers with an

				intentional focus on “transitioning” ENL students.
Visit science classroom that have ENL students (transitioning) to observe what ENL practices are taking place to accommodate those students.	Principal XXXX	n/a	J. D. A. K. R. N.	ART specialists visited three science classrooms (605, 705, & 805), and observed the science department meeting. During the classroom visits, ART specialists observed the classroom environment, instruction, and student interactions. ART specialists observed the meeting structure of the science department and then interviewed Ms. Jacobs about her experience as a teacher working with ENL students. ART specialists also met with Assistant Principal E. to discuss her role supporting the science department as well as her experience working with ENL students. AP E advised us that she is struggling to identify effective strategies. She also shared that the school’s goal is to not use cookie cutter supports, but be able to identify what supports to use and how and when to use them.
On 11/26/19 ART specialist will interview the rest of the science teachers to gather qualitative data about their experience and	Principal XXXX	n/a	J. D. A. K. R. N.	

comfort level in working with ENL students				