

# Slow and Steady Wins the Race

## Building Trust in Wakefield Public Schools

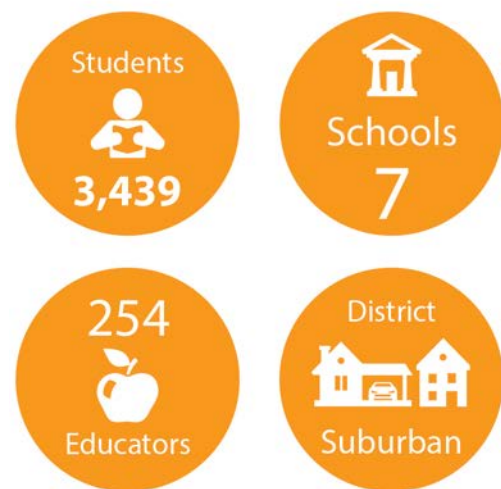
Like many other districts, we have just been through a period of change that has felt both rapid and far-reaching. Teachers and school and district leaders alike have been overwhelmed by a series of new initiatives, each of which has set off a ripple effect of ways that everyone has had to change their work, sometimes in drastic ways. This includes the transition to a new Educator Evaluation Framework, the transition to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks (including the Common Core State Standards), and the resulting adjustments to the way we assess students' understanding at the state and district levels.

When we stepped back from this whirlwind, we realized that if we wanted these new initiatives to be implemented well, we needed to rethink the way that we supported teachers through the changes. At the district level, this meant breaking down all the new expectations into smaller, more manageable pieces. Still, we knew that teachers would benefit from ongoing support.

So we decided, in order to be most successful, we would slow everything down and help all teachers manage the multitude of new initiatives by giving them a strong core of teacher leaders from within their own ranks who they could rely on. We had two questions to consider: ***Who would serve in these roles? And, how could we create a layer of support without creating additional burdens on our teachers?***

### “I’m Here to Help”

When it came to developing this strong core of teacher leaders, we felt that the best descriptor for their work would be “coach.” Our vision was that coaches would support teachers by observing lessons, offering suggestions, finding resources, guiding team meetings, and using a bird’s eye



view to help ensure vertical and horizontal alignment across schools and grades.

We had had a lot of discussion about whether the roles would be part of Unit A (teachers) or Unit B (administrators) contracts. On the one hand, we knew with the overwhelming demands administrators face with the supervision and evaluation process, using these “coaches” as evaluators would help alleviate the pressures of observing and evaluating large caseloads of teachers while also providing teachers with quality feedback.

On the other hand, we wanted to create an environment where people—both coaches and teachers—felt free to take risks and try new things.

This meant that we had to place a premium on developing collegial, collaborative roles.

We ultimately decided that coaches would be a part of Unit A and would retain some classroom teaching responsibilities. We felt it was important that the coaches have some skin in the game so that they are not seen as “just sitting behind a desk pulling strings.”

### A Word about Scheduling

At the elementary levels, we decided to create K-4 Literacy Coaches whose main role and responsibility would be to support the teachers in literacy instruction. By effectively using our data and benchmark scores for our students' reading levels, we created tiered reading groups. Literacy Coaches provide targeted instruction, once a day, to learners who need tier three supports. This unique teaching load allows the coaches to impact student achievement through direct instruction. It also gives them a flexible, open schedule so they can provide in-class support for teachers, co-plan upcoming lessons, and provide job-embedded PD for the teachers on reading skills and strategies like close reading techniques.

Our coaches at the middle school and high school took on the role of coordinators for our ELA, Math, and Science departments. These 5<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade coordinators each play significant roles for their fellow colleagues by collaboratively working on the design and implementation of common assessments, prepping and analyzing data at grade level PLC meetings, and unpacking their respective subject's curriculum standards into tangible and applicable concepts that students and teachers alike can understand. Just like their elementary counterparts, each teaches one course a day, for only one period, ranging from an accelerated math course for advanced MCAS math students at the middle school, an Automation and Robotics course for 8<sup>th</sup> graders, and a writing elective at the high school level.

### “Are we for this or against it?”

When we first announced these new roles, we hoped that some of our top teachers from within the district would step up and apply. This was part of our vision: we wanted these new roles to recognize and retain some of our best teachers and help spread existing best practices.

However, we didn't receive the flood of applications we had hoped for. This was in part because there was a lot of uncertainty about how the role would actually work. How would coaches manage to be in a slightly “elevated” role, while still being part of their larger peer group? Would the work be manageable in addition to maintaining classroom responsibilities? Would they provide feedback timely enough to effect teaching practice? Would the district leaders commit to these new roles or was this just going to be the latest fad? Could a historically inconsistent budget sustain these positions or would they be the first on the chopping block when facing budget cuts?

We knew that the first few months of rollout would be crucial to the long-term success of the initiative. Teachers were going to be watching closely to figure out: are we for this? Or against it? As one elementary teacher stated, *“Are they just looking for a ‘gotcha’ or are they really here to support us?”* But as time passed and more staff fostered relationships with our coaches and coordinators, the results have been grounded in trust and yielded successful teaching and learning. *“I could not have successfully implemented guided reading without my literacy coach. Absolutely invaluable resource.”* This quote was just one of the many positive quotes teachers shared on the district's professional development survey.

### Hurry Up and Build Trust!

A large part of that determination would be based on their day-to-day interactions with coaches and thus we knew that getting the right people into these roles would be crucial. After some discussion, we decided that since we were still not

getting enough internal candidates to apply, we would open the role up to people outside the district.

In hiring for these roles, we emphasized the usual skills: content expertise, strong instructional practice, and experience designing and/or leading PD. However, we equally valued leadership skills such as building relationships, facilitating difficult conversations, and navigating the “politics” within a school. Finally, we put a premium on people who presented themselves as humble and unassuming. We wanted to create an atmosphere that was focused on support; rather than “I know more than you,” it was about “Let me see how I can help you...and if I don’t know something, then I will find out.” We looked for people who could position themselves as teachers *and* as learners, people who held a belief that everyone can grow and improve.

We also knew we would have to double down on efforts to build trust right away. This concept seemed a bit at odds with itself—is it possible to build trust *quickly*? Would external candidates face a harder time than internal ones, given their “newcomer status?”

### Example Activities of Coaches during Early Implementation (Months 1-4)

We set aside the first four months for coaches to perform “entry level” supports to their peers. These are not the activities we saw coaches taking on in the long term, but we wanted to create some building blocks that would allow coaches to develop trust of their peers.

Therefore, for the first four months, they did things like:

- Opening up his/her classroom for others to observe
- Sharing resources and demonstrating follow through - “If I don’t know the answer, I will find it and get back to you.”
- Attending team meetings more in a listening capacity
- Taking on some duties for the team that help lighten the load for others, such as reorganizing shared book room to make leveled books more accessible.

Because of these concerns, we decided to give the coaches time before they were engaged in too much other work to position themselves as the “I’m here to help” people. This meant allowing them the first three to four months on the job to spend time building relationships with peer teachers.

Coaches have all agreed that it is important that they wait to be invited into teachers’ classrooms rather than suggesting a visit. However, once invited, they are sure to follow up and make the experience “low stress” and positive to ease fears.

In an overall environment where we felt pressure to move quickly, slowing down the hiring and decreasing the coaches’ duties in the first four months was not an easy decision. But, in retrospect, it was absolutely the right one. Now, a half a year into our work, we have more teachers expressing interest in coaching roles.

### What’s Next:

We are eager to see how the coaching roles might evolve over time. In our 2015-2016 school budget, we were able to add Math Coaches at the elementary levels whose role and responsibility will mirror the Literacy Coaches. Additionally we were able to support our 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers at the middle school with a Reading Coach who will do some important work around training and benchmarking while being an in-class support system to enhance concrete reading skills.

Our next venture is creating a new layer of teacher leaders who are not fully coaches, but who are also engaged in developing and spreading strong instructional practices. However, we are wary of creating “exemplar” or “model” classrooms for a lot of the same reasons outlined above. We would prefer to retain a collegial environment wherein teachers feel free to experiment and work together toward the ultimate goal of improving instruction without the burden of doing everything right the first time around.

Therefore, we are working to implement “Learning Lab” classrooms. These will be led by teachers who are willing to open up their classrooms to their colleagues. While we are still in the infant stages of the Learning Labs, we are excited that a teacher leader from each grade level will be opening their classroom to their peers. We will be welcoming more and more “Lab Teachers” as the program moves forward. This will take the burden off our pilot group by bringing in new Lab Teachers. Lab Teachers receive support from their Literacy and/or Math Coach as well as administration on providing the time and coverage for their peers to come and observe. The expectation is by utilizing the valuable resources we have in our teachers, best practices will be implemented more easily, teachers will be open to new ideas and instruction, but most importantly, there will be continuity across the grade level and across the district. Ultimately, we want our teachers to feel that they are working as a cohesive team to support our students and drive their learning more effectively.

We hope that the coaches and Learning Labs will offer support that is both broad and deep. We are eager to see how this support system benefits all teachers, and ultimately our students.