

Mechanicsburg: Leadership at All Levels

FOR
TEACHERS
SCHOOLS
DISTRICTS



Practicing
Equity and Ethics



Building Relationships
and Partnerships



Fostering
Collaborative Culture



Advancing Instruction
and Student Learning



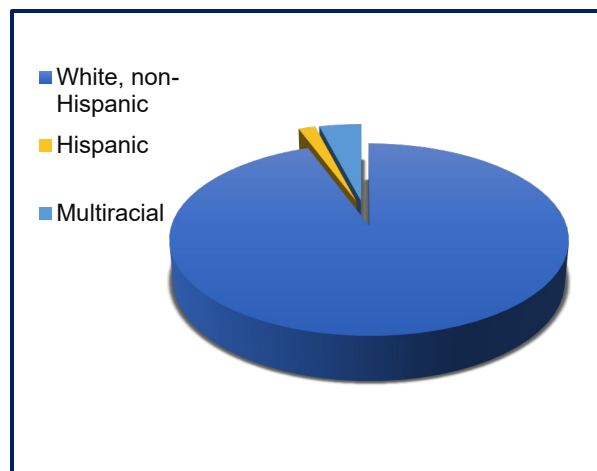
Driving
Initiatives

Key Lessons from Mechanicsburg Exempted Village School District

- *Mechanicsburg has developed and maintained multi-leveled committee structures in the forms of teacher-based teams (TBT), building leadership teams (BLT), and district leadership teams (DLT).*
- *Teacher-based team meeting time is built into the school day with common planning time.*
- *Teachers start informal leadership initiatives that receive district and community support.*
- *Mechanicsburg teachers, from resident educators to veteran instructors worked with peers across the county to plan and present at a professional development day organized by multiple districts to crowdsource instructional practices.*
- *Opportunities to lead and advance the field is spilling over into the classroom, as students are doing research for national memorial and historical sites.*
- *The incorporation of social-emotional learning into multiple disciplines is a priority strategy within the district led by teachers.*

Introduction

Mechanicsburg Exempted Village School District is a small, rural district located in Champaign County, west central Ohio. Mechanicsburg serves 829 students with 61 educators. The district has one high school (grades 9–12), one middle school (grades 6–8), and one elementary school (grades PreK–5). The district make-up of students is 93.5 percent White, non-Hispanic, 4 percent Multiracial, and 1.6 percent Hispanic. Sixteen percent of students have a disability, and 30.7 percent of students are economically disadvantaged. The





district has established a deliberate approach to cultivate “leadership at all levels.” The district’s pursuit of student success is significantly aided by the informal and formal leadership of teachers.

Cultural Approach

One teacher in the district stated, “The culture is: if you see a need, you meet it.” At every level in the district, responsiveness to the needs of students and the goals of the district are paramount. The culture encourages the allocation of resources and distribution of decision making to meet the identified needs and to advance the district’s work. The superintendent has built a philosophy rooted in the work of the Center for Creative Leadership whereby direction, alignment and commitment are the outcomes of leadership—leadership demonstrated at all levels (Figure 1).

LEADERSHIP OUTCOMES: Direction, Alignment, Commitment (DAC)



Figure 1: DAC Framework used in Mechanicsburg

Source: Direction, Alignment, Commitment: Achieving Better Results through Leadership published by the Center for Creative Leadership, Greensboro, NC, Copyright © 2015.

Throughout the district, teachers of various grades, subjects and experience levels take on leadership activities. While various forms of teacher leadership have been part of the district culture for a long time, the focus on it is now more strategic as a lever to move work forward. “At first, teacher leadership was by default, but now it is intentional. For the first 11 years of my time here, we would cycle through administration at a rapid rate...so the most seasoned teachers were the ones who were keeping things going as we were going through the changes,” stated a teacher leader. According to interviewees, the district now has had consistent administration in the buildings for the last five years and teacher leadership focuses less on filling administrative



gaps and more on leading as teachers. While there has been increased strength and stability in the administrative team, it has not usurped teacher leadership but rather allowed teacher leadership to flourish. “I believe in trickle-down leadership,” stated a teacher leader. “It starts at the top.”

An administrator credited teacher leadership growth to a systems approach (see below) in Mechanicsburg. “When you act outside system thinking, it is chaos. No one knows where they fit in,” stated an administrator. “We have systems and structures that allow teachers to do what they do best.”

Structural Approach

Mechanicsburg’s systems and structures include formal teacher leadership roles and informal teacher leadership opportunities. Part of its formal teacher leadership structure started with the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP) when the district was in school improvement status in 2008. While Mechanicsburg has advanced out of school improvement status, it has maintained the committee structures for teacher-based teams (TBTs), building leadership teams (BLTs), and district leadership teams (DLTs). “We expect the teacher-based teams to inform the building, and the building to inform the district leadership team,” asserted an administrator. “Not the other way around—pushing from the district leadership down to teacher teams.”

“We have systems and structures that allow teachers to do what they do best.”

Teacher-based team meeting time is built into the school day with common planning time, even with constraints of reduction in force, noted an administrator. Facilitation of the teacher-based teams varies by group, with some groups rotating meeting responsibilities among members, some without a defined meeting management approach, and others led by a volunteer member. Teachers who serve on the BLT or DLT, who may or may not lead the teacher-based teams, are in formal leadership positions and receive supplemental pay for their service.

Mentors for resident educators and teachers who transfer into the district also assume formal teacher leadership roles in the district. Teacher leaders may also serve as project coordinators on grant-sponsored projects such as the Socio-Emotional Learning Development program. Formal teacher representation may also be a part of various subcommittees.

Informal teacher leadership opportunities are plentiful. Teachers start initiatives that not only receive the district’s support but also the community’s support, such as the Purple Star program to support students, families and staff members who are connected to the military. Teachers lead and participate in book clubs. Teachers also volunteer to participate in advisory committees



and prototyping for the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System. A large part of the informal leadership comes in the form of planning or offering professional development to peers.

Professional development presentations are a common way for all teachers, from resident educators to veteran instructors, to demonstrate leadership. Mechanicsburg teachers worked with peers across the county to plan and present at Crowdstruction, a professional development day organized by multiple districts in Champaign County to crowdsource instructional practices.

Fostering Collaborative Culture

Many of the interviewees cited the importance of building a collaborative culture as a teacher with varying degrees of success. Mechanicsburg teachers, especially mentors, try to plant the seed of a collaborative culture with new teachers early. “I have some new hires who are going to come in 2 weeks to a teacher-based team meeting,” shared a teacher leader. “I also asked them to read a book over the summer before they start.” Another teacher walked through how she was a part of the selection committee for a new staff member, attended the board meeting when the new hire was approved, and continued to build the relationship with the new teacher. “She knew that we cared about her,” she said. “When things would slip, I could address it with her.”

“It also helps me learn and grow by helping other teachers.”

The resident educators interviewed seem to appreciate the candid feedback provided by peer teachers and believe that it was done with respect in order to make the new teacher better and work as a team. Teachers leaders also noted the value they received by building a collaborative culture with new teachers. “It also helps me learn and grow by helping other teachers,” stated a teacher leader.

Several teachers shared examples of how peers came to them to ask for assistance in addressing barriers to a collaborative culture. These teachers did not have a formal position of authority, but wielded relational influence on their colleagues. In their stories, they offered candor rooted in care and respect for team members. Interviewees’ collaborative toolbox included humor, positivity, listening, appreciation, and honesty. Teachers foster collaboration by incorporating a variety of ideas into a project to build ownership, being present to peers, hosting potlucks and working together to advance instruction.



Advancing Instruction and Learning

Mechanicsburg cited multiple examples of teacher leadership moving the needle for instruction and learning. It may occur in professional development days (also known as waiver days), professional learning communities or one-to-one sharing. One new teacher discussed how she executes a “flipped” classroom, in which instruction is accessed outside of class time through video lessons and classroom time is used to work with students on questions and problems. She has shared her experience in multiple venues with peers. Another teacher shared an example of how a graduate school project turned into a major resource for the school when she developed an internal Google platform to facilitate information sharing among staff members. It houses faculty materials including notes from teacher-based teams.

Mechanicsburg’s TBTs often serve as professional learning communities. Mechanicsburg has used its teacher-based teams to delve into student assessment data and design interventions accordingly. The high school BLT established a short cycle assessment routine for expectations of when assessments are administered and data are reviewed. Each TBT uses the structure to look at student data on short-cycle assessments. A similar form is used with the OIP, whereby teachers create an actionable plan and tools for enhancing instruction based on data. In the lower grade levels, data are also critical for review in TBTs. “For us data is a strength,” stated an elementary teacher. “We are constantly analyzing data. We look for reteaching and flexible grouping, ways to stretch the curriculum, short cycle assessments, and what areas we need to adapt and to make better.” An administrator also discussed how the buildings look at state value-added data when it comes back with both the BLTs and the TBTs.

Several teacher leaders talked about sharing articles, research and books with peers unprompted. One teacher started a book club for the district with roughly a dozen staff members participating in the group on their own time. “With our book study, we created safety and vulnerability,” the teacher leader said. “You can talk about what you want to say and feel. You have a shared sense of purpose.”

In addition to the peer-to-peer interaction that promotes teacher leadership, principals have a role in pointing out leadership potential among staff members. “When you recognize someone in a classroom who is super strong,” noted an administrator, “you place a bug in their ear and help them explore opportunities to lead.”

Opportunities to lead and advance the field are spilling over into the classroom. Through the leadership of a history teacher, students are conducting research for national memorial sites. “I wanted to use *place* to teach about events and historical times. The class studied how kids experienced ‘dark sites,’ battlefield or a place where tragic things happen,” explained the teacher. “That spurred our kids to do research. Our 9th-graders are doing research for the Pentagon memorial and the Johnstown flood and heritage site.”



Driving Initiatives

Initiatives are led and championed by teacher leaders collectively and individually. A few interviewees articulated the value of teachers driving change. “If the administration hears an idea and you present it in a well-informed, well-researched manner, and it will benefit the district,” asserted a teacher leader, “they will support it in any way they can. They know that if a teacher leads it more teachers will buy in ...instead of having it forced down teachers’ throats.”

The culture around supporting teacher agency was credited with teacher willingness to pilot ideas and concepts not just for the district but for the state and nation. Several teachers in Mechanicsburg have assisted with various projects to advance the field at large including prototyping the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System (OTES) and informing definitions of 21st-century learning skills with Battelle for Kids.

“It was the first time he had been thanked as a Vietnam veteran.”

Multiple interviewees discussed acceptance of risk-taking that encourages more teachers to try new things and take on initiatives. “The superintendent lets the principal make decisions and the teachers are empowered by the principals,” stated a teacher leader. “You can tell teachers that they don’t have to worry about being perfect and making mistakes.” An administrator shared, “We create platforms for teachers to be excited about bringing new things to district. It builds culture when you turn over leadership to teachers and help them grow programs.”

A teacher initiated the Purple Star program to support and recognize active duty military members, veterans and their families. She started in the elementary school before she was aware of the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) Purple Star Award (Figure 2). She engaged a team of staff members, and then expanded the program district wide. The team also includes a current teacher who is an active duty member of the military and recently returned from deployment. Mechanicsburg received a Purple Star award from ODE in 2018. “It was the best thing I did in district,” she said. “Someone came up to me after our first recognition assembly and said it was the first time he had been thanked as a Vietnam veteran.”



Figure 2: Mechanicsburg received an Ohio Department of Education Purple Star in 2018



Practicing Equity and Ethics

Most interviewees felt that the opportunity to lead was accessible to all who sought it out. One teacher, however, did note experiencing resistance from peers to taking on teacher leadership within the team. The teacher was able to find informal, external ways to take on leadership and noted a desire to explore the source of the resistance, including the individual’s own self-reflection. Another caveat mentioned both by new and experienced teachers was that new teachers may not want to take on formal leadership roles in order “not to bite off more than they can chew.”

While informal teacher leadership prospects are limitless, there are finite formal roles. The process for selecting representatives for the building leadership team and district leadership team in the district is a combination of teachers demonstrating interest and capability and principals balancing team composition, and individuals interviewed noted that different leadership styles are accepted. For example, the high school building leadership team includes representatives who demonstrated leadership by volunteering to lead their TBTs and teachers who were considered well-respected in the school. The representatives from the BLT to the DLT are designated collectively by the BLT. Consideration is also made for balance in subject matter expertise and staff roles (not just teachers’ roles).

Teachers also remarked that organizational skills and willingness to learn are key personal qualities to be a teacher leader. “If you remain organized, you can be a leader,” remarked a teacher leader. “The minute you drop a project, you lose trust.” Another teacher stated, “To be a leader, you have to be a learner. You have to be willing to learn and to be willing to grow.”

Themes of success for all students and inclusion of all students were repeated in multiple interviews. Teachers have taken the lead on developing instruction for social-emotional learning standards and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) to make sure that all children are reached regardless of personal adversities. The incorporation of social-emotional learning into multiple disciplines is a priority strategy within the district.

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Building Relationships

Relationship building among all stakeholders was valued by the teacher leaders interviewed. When asked what the one thing people need to know about teacher leadership, a teacher said, “They need to know that people matter if they know nothing else—whether it is a teacher or student. Any connection you have to show that you care about them as a person



makes them open to learning.” In working with colleagues, the strategies discussed in fostering collaborative culture also relate to building teacher-to-teacher relationships.

A couple of teachers noted the importance of scheduling time to connect more with students through planning periods or what is called “crunch time” in the high school. These are times to focus intensively on what students need individually; this advances learning and relationships.

Mechanicsburg teacher leaders also work on developing strong relationships with parents and the community. Several teachers talked about their techniques for engaging with parents, including having one positive contact with a parent at the beginning of the term and contacting a parent at least once per term with an email or call. Teachers also use *Good News Grams* to send home to parents. Mechanicsburg is also deploying technology to communicate with families such as the *Remind* system and *Signup Genius* for volunteer opportunities. Teachers in the arts, extracurricular sponsors and athletic coaches also referenced how parades, art events and games are ways of building relationships with parents and the community.

It is also critical to develop relationships among teacher leaders. The aforementioned Purple Star program is just one example of intentional community building among teacher leaders. A teacher connected with the local business community to have 3rd-graders visit businesses and author a book about the community. The lesson was also adjusted to the 1st-grade standard for a community learning experience tied to English language arts. An art teacher also did a student art auction at a local coffee shop.

Conclusion

A Mechanicsburg teacher summed up the ethos of teacher leadership among the interviewees in the district when he said, “Accomplish the mission, but find ways to improve the organization. You could just continue to keep the way the boat is running, but why not improve how it sails?”

Mechanicsburg continues to see how it can “improve how the boat sails” by taking lessons from the OIP and intentional engagement and development of teachers to hone a structure and culture for teacher leadership. The district is also known for its willingness to pilot and test programs for schools, teachers and classrooms. The district’s efforts are resulting in better outcomes for students.



About the Teacher Leadership Case Study

The Ohio Department of Education, in collaboration with C H Smith & Associates, conducted case studies on teacher leadership in five Ohio school districts in 2019. A convenience sample of several teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders in multiple building and district roles was drawn for each district. From the sample, an individual or group interview was requested in order to capture information about promising practices in teacher leadership and understand how components of Ohio's Teacher Leadership Framework are in effect throughout the state.