Leadership in Action
School Leader
LEADERSHIP IN ACTION | Benjamin Franklin Elementary School, San Antonio, Texas

Hugo Saucedo sits across the table from a new teacher we’ll call Sandra. It’s the end of another long day at Benjamin Franklin Elementary School in San Antonio, Texas, and he has stopped by her classroom to check in with her—not as the school principal, but as a colleague and friend. Sandra is struggling with classroom management, and Principal Saucedo wants to see how today went. He can tell it was another tough one. He’ll offer feedback and guidance during an upcoming classroom observation—running through a formal pre-visit protocol and formal debrief—but right now he is in pure listening mode.

In some ways, it’s easy for Saucedo to step into the shoes of the teachers he supports: he’s in year two of his principal career, the daily rhythm of the classroom, its incredible highs and heart-wrenching lows, still fresh in his memory. He knows what it’s like to care so deeply about children, to be so focused on their success, and yet to find yourself on occasion battling to get through the day.

During the hour Saucedo sits with Sandra in her classroom, something remarkable happens. They are politely interrupted not once, not twice, but more than half a dozen times by colleagues who are popping into Sandra’s classroom to offer to her their support. One, like Saucedo, is checking in. Another is dropping off a promised resource. Still another is making plans to visit Sandra’s classroom later that week.

“I didn’t ask them to do that,” Saucedo later reflects. “That schoolwide support? That collective problem-solving and collaboration? That’s just how we do things here.” Saucedo is reluctant to take credit for the ways teachers at Benjamin Franklin work together, yet it also clear that the scene in Sandra’s classroom fills him with pride and is one he believes represents the progress they’ve made as a school—and that he’s made as a leader—during his tenure.

Between 2018 and 2019, Franklin has improved on a wide range of student and school outcomes measured under the Texas Accountability System: student achievement is up, with its scale score increasing by 5 points, and achievement gaps have narrowed significantly, with its scale score increasing by a dramatic 18 points. As a result, the school’s academic progress score increased by 7 points and its overall performance score increased by 10 points. Nearly all students at Franklin are Latinx, and 93 percent are considered economically disadvantaged. Saucedo is especially proud to be making a difference for children who have been systematically denied equitable access to the resources and opportunities they need to be successful, both in school and in life.

“I’m not a top-down leader,” he shares. “I’m a collective leader. Our teachers have the expertise, and it’s my job to ignite their passion and to provide them with the support and conditions they need to come up with solutions to meet our students’ needs. When I do things right, they are really leading a lot of the decisions we make as a school.”

Sometimes that means participating in teacher advisory councils overseen by Saucedo, reviewing school data and district requirements and determining, together, what’s going to work for their community—as well as what Saucedo needs to bring up with district leaders for further discussion. (“I’m not afraid to speak with our assistant superintendent about anything that doesn’t align with our school’s needs,” Saucedo shares. “We’re fortunate. We have supportive district leaders, right up to Superintendent Martinez, who hear us out and are willing to let us work through things. The accountability is there, but so is the flexibility.”)

Other times, teachers lead through their day-to-day work together. After the third-grade team reviewed math data, they identified a few crucial concepts they needed to reteach. They consulted with the second-grade team and realized there was an opportunity to strengthen their approach for this year’s second graders before they entered third-grade classrooms the following year. The initiative would require some shared planning outside of their normal team meeting schedule. Saucedo learned about their idea to work together across grade-level teams during one of his daily classroom rounds and his immediate response was, “What do you need from me? What can I do to help?”

“What they did there? Identifying a problem and coming up with a solution? That’s leadership. It’s my job to model that approach, to provide the vision, and to support them to take initiative,” Saucedo explains.

When things are going well, it can be easy to forget how different this kind of school culture is for many educators—not to mention students, parents, and other community members.

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1The 2018 report can be found here. The 2019 report can be found here.
“It sounds obvious to say ‘I’m going to support this great idea,’ but the truth is it has taken a lot of work to get staff to a place where they trust me and each other enough to engage in the conversations that lead to those great ideas,” he shares. “Not everyone was on board, especially at first. And, to be honest, I’m not always convinced the proposals that come my way are great, at least at first. But it’s so important to me that everyone feels their voice matters, their expertise matters. We can’t do what we need to do for kids if everyone isn’t offering their all. We work to light that flame within our students, and I’m committed to lighting and fanning that flame within our teachers.”

“I give a lot of credit to my supervisor, Dr. Jonelda De Leon,” Saucedo continues. “With all of her schools and principals, she really listens to us. What’s your vision? What’s your goal? She’ll challenge us, of course, probing and asking us to think about other things. At the end of the day, she’ll advocate for us with higher ups and the results are there: her schools are performing better than others.”

“I still have a lot to learn and there are many places I need to grow as a leader, but I’ve got a really strong support and a model for how I want to do this work—today as a principal and, someday perhaps, as a district leader or superintendent myself.”

In addition to ongoing district support, Saucedo credits the research-backed, job-embedded leadership training that San Antonio ISD and New Leaders have provided to aspiring leaders. “The feedback was brutal, honest, raw,” he says. “And I loved it. New Leaders improved me in ways that I never would have otherwise. That personalized feedback and coaching built in me a certain amount of grit and a willingness to be vulnerable that I wouldn’t have gotten anywhere else. It made me a better leader and a better person.”

When asked about his career plans and how he manages the workload and stressors of challenging his school community to do things differently, Saucedo becomes emotional.

“This work is so personal. I am the son of immigrants and while growing up my family moved around a lot doing migrant work. I had been to 21 schools by the time I was a junior in high school, so as a student I have seen how much variation there is in our education system. Jefferson High School here in San Antonio was transformative for me.”

Though Saucedo had previously been put into a special education program on account of his developing English skills, he was identified for the gifted and talented program at Jefferson. “Jefferson teachers and school leaders saw something special in me, and they wanted to cultivate it,” he reflects. “That had never happened to me before—and, unfortunately, that’s how too many students experience school.”

When his parents were gearing up to move again for work, the principal came to his house to convince them Saucedo needed to continue his education at Jefferson. Although he didn’t speak Spanish and Saucedo’s parents didn’t speak English, they figured out a way to communicate. Saucedo’s family moved, but for the first time he stayed enrolled at his previous school. That’s when he knew he wanted to become an educator.

“I want our school to be what Jefferson was for me for all of our kids,” Saucedo shares. “We have a strong culture of caring and a love of learning, and to take our work to the next level we’re building a culture of leadership, too. To do that, we’ve got to trust each other and be willing to be vulnerable.”

“We in education tend to work in silos and schools tend to be these fortresses that for many can feel uninviting. Little by little that’s changing. I’ve experienced resistance from some teachers and a few didn’t like the message and they left. Even some parents had reservations. But generally speaking everyone has been receptive and excited, and we’ve been able to move the culture to be more inclusive and more challenging—disrupting notions of what school is and could be for our kids.”

To achieve this shared vision of excellence and equity at Benjamin Franklin, Saucedo knows that deeply engaging and partnering with every member of his school community—recognizing and tapping the expertise, ideas, and initiative of teachers, students, and parents—is absolutely crucial. He knows in his heart and soul the difference this kind of leadership can make, and he is committed to providing each student with a meaningful, engaging educational experience that encourages them to dream big and that sets them up for success in whatever their future holds.