When Donnell Cannon first assumed the principalship of North Edgecombe High School in Tarboro, NC, he knew the transition from teacher to school leader would be big. He acknowledges it was an even bigger transition than he imagined.

“It was hard,” Cannon reflects. “Everyone has certain expectations about what a leader is supposed to be. I’m in charge, that top-down sort of thing. In some ways, I tried to show up as not myself because I knew what was expected. At the same time, I don’t wear a formal suit. That’s just not me. For some, it can be a relief. For others, it’s alarming because it’s unexpected.”

“I was young, too,” he shares, “and I had to overcome some expectations about my experience. Ultimately, being true to myself and what I know our community needs, I have been able to model and give an open invitation to teachers and students to chart their own course. We are doing things differently at our school because business as usual wasn’t working for our students.”

North Edgecombe HS serves 220 students in northeastern North Carolina. Although it is a tight-knit community, being remotely located means some students travel up to 50 minutes on a bus to get to school each day, which can complicate school improvement and community-building efforts that might work in other contexts. Cannon acknowledges the differences between the rural poverty he sees now and the urban poverty he encountered growing up in Richmond, VA, but he spends little time talking about deficits.

“I work at the best school with the most amazing kids you will ever meet in this world,” he states. “Each believes that something different can happen in their lifetime, for themselves and our world. They have been subjected to systems that were not designed for them, yet they have optimism things can change things. Our staff that believe the same thing. We can bring the possible into now. We have to blur some lines to go the distance for our kids. We are educators, yes, and we are also social workers, sitting at dinner tables, experiencing joy with our students and their families.” Cannon notes that a large percentage of teachers at his school are fellow Teach For America alums, who, like Cannon, came to the region through their placement and have now made it home.

“We start with: what are the hopes and dreams of our parents and students?” Cannon explains. “And we build our work from there. We want to build something beautiful that really works for our kids.”

This approach—coupled with a willingness to do things radically different—means North Edgecombe HS doesn’t look like your typical school. Cannon has reorganized the staffing structure, bringing more staff into leadership positions and supporting them to truly drive and inform strategies and decision-making. In some ways, distributing leadership suits Cannon’s default personal leadership style. At the same time, it’s clearly strategic.

“I understand where my zone of genius is,” he explains. “I’m certainly working to get really good at the things I’m not good at, but I know I can take us further, faster, by focusing on my strengths.”

For Cannon, setting the vision and inspiring his team is a key skill and top priority for him. The leadership team—called the School Design Team—includes staff whose strengths complement his own. His assistant principal and a couple of key teacher leaders are really good at filling in the details of his vision and bringing essential nuance to his big, bold ideas. (“I would never be in charge of a testing plan,” Cannon states. “There are so many important details. I’ll rely on my team to design and lead those types of processes.”) And while Cannon regularly engages in empathy interviews with teachers, students, and families as he’s considering new initiatives, he acknowledges that his default is to move quickly and he can, at times, get ahead of his school community.

The school climate and culture specialist is really in tune with the mood of the school and plays a crucial role in assessing the community’s readiness for something new and designing effective rollout plans based on those insights.

At the same time, Cannon highlights how his leadership changes based on the situation. “I can and usually am a distributor,” he explains. “Often, I lead from the middle or the back, supporting a member of the School Design Team to lead from out front. But I can also be someone who makes quick decisions from up top.... The context requires different leadership from me.”

The results of Cannon’s approach are impressive. During each year of his three-year tenure, North Edgecombe HS has exceeded academic growth expectations on the state accountability system, with growth rates accelerating from one year to the next.1 Cannon credits much of the school’s success to the support and flexibility he has received from the district and a number of crucial partnerships the district has facilitated. In particular, Cannon points to his and the district’s work with NC State University’s Educational Leadership Academy (NELA), Public Impact, and New Leaders.

“As a small, rural district our people are stretched thin,” says Erin Swanson, Director of Innovation with Edgecombe County Public Schools. “It’s a real challenge for us to have the in-house capacity to provide such high-level, job-embedded professional

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1The 2018-19 report card can be found here.
A number of Edgecombe school leaders, including Cannon, were trained through NELA’s nationally recognized principal preparation program, which provides aspiring leaders with a yearlong, job-embedded residency working and learning in a school. Cannon explains that NELA’s model enabled him to learn and apply leadership strategies while continuing to make an immediate difference for the community: “I didn’t have the luxury of being able to step out of the work to be a full-time learner,” he says. “Our kids need amazing people showing up for them right now.” The research backs up the effectiveness of this approach, and Cannon also highlights how important it was for him to be able to learn with and from leaders who deeply understood the unique context of the community of which he would become a leader.

Edgecombe has worked with NELA for many years, and a significant percentage of school leaders in the district are graduates of NELA. The partnerships with Public Impact and New Leaders are more recent, launching in 2017, and add important elements to the district’s efforts to distribute leadership within and across schools while building a stronger, more coherent leadership pipeline.

Public Impact is now working with 11 of 14 district schools to implement its Opportunity Culture model, an approach to school organization through which exemplary teachers are supported to reach more students by serving as Multi-Classroom Leaders (MCLs), teachers who leads teams of colleagues, or Expanded Impact Teachers (EITs), educators who teach more students and have added instructional responsibilities. New Leaders provides MCLs with targeted leadership development training that equips them with the skills they need to be successful as they make the transition from effective teacher to effective teacher leader.

Public Impact works closely with both district officials and school principals to design systems and structures to support the success of teacher leaders. According to Shonaka Ellison, senior consultant with Public Impact, flexibility and creativity are crucial to this work. “In many cases, the Opportunity Culture model requires both schools and districts to make some big changes,” she explains. “It’s human nature to be resistant to change, to fear the unknown, to wonder if you can be successful doing things differently. Where we’ve been able to implement the model with fidelity and see real results, like in Edgecombe, it’s because everyone, from school-based leaders to the district’s HR, finance, and communications offices and, crucially, the superintendent, have a shared commitment to the vision and a willingness to try something new.”

Hiring, in particular, represents an important part of the Opportunity Culture model where districts and schools may need to shift their practices. Public Impact, New Leaders, the district, and school leaders work together on the hiring process for MCLs, ensuring those selected for positions meet a stringent set of criteria aligned with the responsibilities and expectations of the position.

“The Opportunity Culture model requires that the MCLs maintain real role clarity,” explains Hannah Irvin, program director with New Leaders. “To be successful and deliver results, MCLs must be focused on instructional leadership, and their time has to be protected to work with their assigned team of teachers. The New Leaders training is premised on the structure Public Impact gets in place and on the educators in MCL positions coming in with a certain mindset and skillset, especially a deep, fundamental belief in the potential of all children and a proven track record of success as a teacher.”

At the same time, the process also provide principals with an important degree of autonomy, ensuring those selected for new leadership positions reflect the school’s needs and priorities.

All partner organizations continue to provide ongoing support to district and school-based leaders, from site visits to training and thought partnership. And they have worked together to build a model through which leadership positions are not only consistent across the district, but also consistently funded—crucial for sustainability.

“We all want to honor teacher leaders by paying them more for their added responsibilities,” says Chandler Rowland, a consultant with Public Impact. “Early in our process, we work with the district to conduct a stipend analysis to understand what compensation structures, combined with the new career pathways and ongoing professional development, would be competitive with neighboring systems, helping to attract outstanding educators and keep them in the district long-term.” Partners also work together to advise school leaders on their budgets, among other areas of support, ensuring that their plans to implement the model are sustainable.

Cannon experiences daily the impact of having high-quality support that is so interconnected and aligned with his vision. And he is effusive when speaking about how the district has made this possible. “Erin will create the lane at the district level for us to have a runway to do this work,” he explains. “She’ll connect us with resources. She’ll make sure we have support. And she’ll make sure we have the freedom to run with our ideas, even our more unconventional ones, and prove that we can get results.”

Together, Edgecombe County Public Schools and its partners are showing that over time, not overnight, investing in leadership at the school and system levels drives outcomes and real results for students.