Leadership in Action
Large Metropolitan District
In 2017, a team of researchers found that students in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) were achieving larger, faster academic gains than their peers in other large districts across the country. According to their analyses, in the five years between 3rd grade and 8th grade CPS students learned the equivalent of six years’ worth of literacy and math content. Many pointed to the district’s focus on investing in school principals and providing them with sufficient autonomy as a crucial contributor to those results.

Matt Lyons, Chief Talent Officer with CPS, acknowledges the centrality of leadership to the district’s strategy. He is also quick to point out that CPS officials have focused on continuously improving their approach.

“We know successful organizations don’t rely on a single person,” he explains, “and we are committed to a district-wide leadership agenda. At the same time, we know we need to create more diversity in leadership across the district, and we need to be much more deliberate about building our bench of leaders.” These efforts go hand-in-hand and can help address another interconnected need: equity of access to leadership opportunities.

“We’ve heard from employees across the district that it’s unclear how to move up,” Lyons adds. “Often, educators learn about new roles or opportunities exclusively via their relationships and networks. Those networks matter, but staff also want greater transparency. At the system level, for us to unlock the potential of our educators and build greater consistency and sustainability, we can’t be dependent on word-of-mouth referrals.”

In 2019, the district unveiled its strategic plan along with a new, aligned initiative—Lead with CPS—designed to build on its strong leadership investments and provide clearer career pathways. Lead with CPS includes a warehouse of opportunities and resources for Chicago educators who want to grow as leaders, both in their current roles as well as by considering new positions. Opportunities are based on a leadership competency framework that is consistent across all roles and at all levels of the system. It includes programs run by the district and a wide range of district-approved partners. Some, like the Chicago Leadership Collaborative, the district’s signature principal preparation partnerships, have existed for years. Others, such as the Empowered Schools program, which supports principals and teams to design and implement distributed leadership models, are new.

Dr. Allison Tingwall, principal of Curie High School, is among the leaders able to take advantage of new programming offered through Lead with CPS. Along with one of her assistant principals, she is participating in the Leadership Bridge Program, currently in pilot stage, which builds the skills of assistant principals who have been identified as potential successors to principals. They are working together to strengthen instructional leadership across their school and are jointly thinking through transition planning.

Growing leaders is not new to Tingwall. When she became principal of Curie five years ago, she knew she would need to employ a distributed leadership approach to running the school. “With 190 teachers supporting 3,000 students over 180 school days, I could observe one teacher a day and still not get into every classroom in our building,” Tingwall explains. “The idea that I—or even my core leadership team of five assistant principals—could deeply coach and support every teacher in our building was never going to work. The math didn’t add up.”

On top of that, she knew sharing leadership was the right thing to do for the school’s culture. The year before she took the helm, there had been 105 student arrests on the school campus. Those arrests, she knew, were symptoms of deeper issues with the school’s climate. (In the most recent school year, there were just five on-campus arrests—a dramatic shift Tingwall sees as representative of the many improvements she’s fostered during her tenure.)

During her first year on the job, she replaced all of the school’s senior leaders, including assistant principals, deans, and the operations manager. Next, she worked to create new job descriptions for department chairs and the coordinators of the school’s many specialized programs. She had coaching conversations during which staff members could self-select into—or out of—new expectations for their roles. She also established a new instructional leadership team (ILT).

Each academic department also has four to five course teams comprising half a dozen or so teachers per team; 34 teacher leaders serve as course leads across the school. (On the origins of the course teams, Tingwall explains: “There are 29 teachers in our English department. I have never been in a productive, engaging meeting that included 29 people. We needed smaller groups to foster real adult learning.”) In Curie’s model, the learning that takes place with the ILT filters to department chairs, who then coach course leads. Within three to four weeks, the initial work with the ILT has reached every teacher in the building. To make this possible, Tingwall took steps to provide department chairs with an extra, shared planning period to execute their leadership.

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responsibilities, providing common time for planning, data analysis, and collaboration.

“In a big school like this, the formal structures are really important,” Tingwall adds. “But there is also a more informal side to distributed leadership. For a lot of our work, especially the day to day, we take an intentionally organic approach.”

When making the transition to standards-based grading, for example, Tingwall and her leadership team recognized that they needed a different level of buy-in from teachers and the larger school community, especially parents. Tingwall and members of the ILT connected teachers with their peers who were passionate about the new approach and ahead of the curve implementing it in their classrooms. They tapped a wide range of teachers from across departments and grade levels, as well as a mix of veteran and new teachers, to help explain the value and impact of the initiative and to be open and transparent about their struggles. By being “intentionally organic,” Tingwall was able to ensure the same messages were making their way to teachers, students, and parents via both formal channels and the diverse social networks that exist across the school community.

On her work with Leadership Bridge Program, Tingwall is effusive. “The program has helped me provide better support,” she says. In addition to being blown away from the quality and depth of the Leadership Development Plan (LDP) her AP created with guidance from program staff, the explicit focus on transition planning has helped her identify new areas of focus for his development. She highlights the weekly newsletter she sends to staff, which includes an opening message that reinforces shared priorities. It’s an important communication tool for leading such a large school community, but it’s not something her AP has ever had to create himself. “He can absolutely master the skills needed to develop that kind of strategic resource,” Tingwall explains. “But he needs practice and feedback. And now he’s getting it.”

Tingwall also reflects positively on the Lead with CPS initiative writ large, noting how valuable it is for her to be able to direct staff to leadership programs and opportunities that are sponsored by and have the backing of the district.

Beulah McLoyd, former principal of Walter H. Dyett High School for the Arts, shares Tingwall’s enthusiasm for Lead with CPS. McLoyd sat on the principal advisory committee that helped shape the initiative; like Tingwall, a top priority for her was having access to resources that would enable her to effectively support teachers and other educators in her building to grow as leaders, supporting their individual career development and building the capacity of her leadership team.

“Teachers want to be challenged professionally and have a sense of upward mobility professionally within the district,” she says. “But many don’t want to go into administration. I used the Lead with CPS framework to inform individual goal-setting conversations. It was a way to help teachers think about their leadership trajectory in different ways. If you want to do more work with ILTs, which of these competencies do you need to build? If our school needs you to step into a new role, what skills do you need to feel confident with those new responsibilities? Often I could connect them directly with professional development featured on the initiative’s resource and opportunity banks, most of which I wouldn’t otherwise have known about.”

Now supporting CPS principals and teacher leaders as an executive director with New Leaders, McLoyd recognizes that the success of the initiative will depend a great deal on how it is utilized at the school level, where efforts to distribute leadership across the system can either flourish or stall. “Teachers really appreciated the resources, so as principal there’s real motivation to keep coming back to it,” she explains. “At the same time, if the opportunity doesn’t come with a stipend and I don’t have the budget, that could get tricky. Funding is important.”

So is this type of feedback. CPS continues to prioritize and set the tone for authentic, transparent, data-driven collaboration and decision-making. The district regularly engages school leaders, educators, and other stakeholders—including philanthropic, research, and community partners—around implementation of Lead with CPS. The Chicago Public Education Fund, in particular, has provided strategic support for the initiative and financial support for specific programming.

This deep collaboration enables the district to access the best data and resources to inform and implement their strategy, and it’s also a deliberate effort to create a culture that promotes effective, sustainable learning environments for children and adults, alike.

“Trust and collaboration are really important,” says Lyons. “We have a ton of research specifically on our work in Chicago showing this to be true in our schools, and we believe it’s true at the system level as well. We’ve laid an important foundation, but you have to follow up consistently to show continuing commitment. We want to help teachers and school leaders go deeper on using the framework, develop new resources to support them, and showcase through highlights and stories what is possible for our schools and students when educators have access to the right leadership coaching, mentoring, and opportunities.”

On the future of Lead with CPS, Lyons is hopeful the district and its partners will be able to continue responding to the strong appetite from teachers and school leaders for more and more varied leadership pathways. “Leadership at CPS shouldn’t depend on the role you’re in,” he says. “It should be based on how you advance the mission of the organization and inspire others to do the same.”