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Lincoln Turnaround through Sustainability

Lincoln Elementary School

Ogden School District

University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education

Lincoln Turnaround through Sustainability **By Jenai Ali Emmel**

School Lincoln Elementary School

Principal Ross Lunceford

District Ogden School District

Highlight From Turnaround to Sustainable Practice

Narrative **Leader Profile**

Ross Lunceford is a seasoned educator and an award-winning principal in Ogden School District (OSD). He began his career as a 6-8 teacher and spent 5 years teaching reading and ESL at the middle school level. He became a principal of an affluent and relatively high-performing school in 2002. Although he was not an assistant principal prior to the role, he was immediately successful in improving student performance. Ross became the principal of three other schools, with varying demographics, before being assigned to Lincoln Elementary School-the third school in his leadership portfolio with Title 1 status.

School Profile

Lincoln Elementary School serves just under 600 students from diverse backgrounds. The number of students receiving free and reduced lunch qualifies it as Title 1 school based federal guidelines. A few years ago, Lincoln was not doing well. While there were good teachers in the building, the school suffered from inconsistent teaching practice, a negative adult culture, and a small percentage of students with intensive socio-emotional needs. Despite the potential within staff and students, Lincoln Elementary was an F school.

Call to Action

On Friday, Ross received a phone call from central office. The principal at Lincoln Elementary School had been removed that day. Ross had been assigned to take his place. On Monday, Ross joined the Superintendent in announcing the transition to faculty during an all-call staff meeting. Ross made only one statement that day: "I am here to support you."

Leadership Team

When Ross became the Principal at Lincoln, the leadership team was already in place. A dean of students, Jennie De Corso, and a dean of academics, Nicole Lovell, would remain in their roles. However, Ross joined a team that had experienced significant turnover. Students and teachers at Lincoln Elementary had experienced five principals in five years. Deans of students and academics had also turned over frequently.

District Strategy

Ogden School District was also going through a period of transition. OSD established institutional partners to help them grow the capacity of their district and school leaders. The Partnership for Leaders in Education at the University of Virginia (PLE) became a seminal thought-partner in the area of leadership, instructional infrastructure, support and accountability, and talent management. The partnership began to shape the district approach to supporting struggling schools. Brad Smith became Superintendent in 2011 and focused relentlessly on teacher quality. Schools began to

experience record levels of turnover, based on a lack of performance. Ogden also began to support the creation of teacher teams by investing in professional learning communities at every school. Teachers began forming grade-level teams and using protocols to ensure frequent co-planning and data analysis. Sandy Corroles became Superintendent in 2014 and focused intensively on principals and the quality of leadership teams. Many principals were replaced and most of the schools in turnaround status began to advance.

Turnaround Strategy - Years 1 and 2

Ross devoted his first few weeks to examining the quality of teaching and learning at Lincoln. He spent 80% of his time conducting informal classroom observations, being visible during all transitions, and assessing the strength of grade level teams. After a few weeks, Ross grew confident in his school improvement plan and his vision for change:

A Relentless Focus on Reading

Reading instruction was not a cornerstone strategy at Lincoln. While every teacher taught reading, not everyone had a clear programmatic vision for their classroom. Ross believed that by adopting Guided Reading, as a school-wide practice, teachers could begin to support each other in planning and delivery. He also believed that by narrowing the instructional focus the quality of professional development would improve. Most importantly, several teachers were skilled in guided reading and could assume a leadership role in the training and development process. Nicole began to work with grade-levels and individual teacher leaders to improve guided reading practices over the next two years.

Standardized PLC Processes

Professional Learning Communities were a long-standing reform strategy within OSD. There were pockets of success at Lincoln – some grade-level teams implemented structured and meaningful co-planning experiences. However, in order to move Lincoln out of turnaround status, every grade-level PLC would need to be strengthened. Utilizing resources from PLE programming, Ross and Nicole began to standardize PLCs. Grade-level teams were given protocols to guide their discussions. Nicole modeled PLC facilitation to ensure that every team understood the expectation. Eventually, effective practices began to spread.

Intensive Socio-Emotional Supports for Students (Tier 3)

Ross knew that effective reading instruction and consistent PLCs would lead to improved performance over time. He was confident in his leadership team and delegated much of the daily change management work to them. However, it became clear that some of the challenges Lincoln faced would require external support. It became obvious that a handful of students needed much more socio-emotional supports than they had been given. Ross asked the district for more resources including hands-on support from central office leadership. Ultimately, the district assigned a second dean of students to support the leadership team and the students. Over time, the additional layer of support and consistent responses from teachers and leaders helped students adjust to the school environment.

From Turnaround to Sustainable Practice

Lincoln eventually improved its academic standing. After three years, Lincoln advanced from an F to a C in the statewide accountability system. However, Ross and his leadership team were unsatisfied. They knew that teachers and students could perform at even higher levels. Ross's vision was simple – to be the highest achieving Elementary in the Ogden School District. To reach that vision, his team would need to continue improving reading instruction, PLCs, and socio-emotional supports for students. While leadership knew their vision was ambitious, they also believed it was attainable. However, some teachers began to show signs of burnout.

Learning Launch – Years 3 and 4

In order to increase supports for Lincoln, Ross applied to UVAs sustainability program and was accepted based on measurable results. Ross, Jennie, and Nicole developed a next-level vision for Lincoln while in the program. At the heart of their strategy, was a pathway to retain their top talent.

Ross committed his team to launching three new strategies in an effort to sustain progress and create opportunity for future gains:

Resetting the Adult Culture

While Lincoln had improved considerably, there were a handful of teachers resistant to change. The teachers were long-standing veterans, many of whom had dedicated their entire career to Lincoln. As Lincoln began to turnover teachers and administrators, new faculty and staff were hired. Eventually, an “us vs. them” dynamic emerged. Veteran teachers were unwilling to embrace new teachers and new approaches to learning. By the end of the summer, the pathway was clear. Ross and team would need to tackle adult behaviors in a significant way.

During a half-day site visit, the leadership team developed a plan to conquer the history of negativity and to unify the school. With support from a UVA consultant, they designed an all-call staff meeting to be implemented the very next day. The team would tackle negative comments that had been made and use them to establish a set of norms to

guide adult interactions. Teachers recognized their own comments and took ownership over their impact on the culture of the school. Leaders used this opportunity to reaffirm their vision, their values, and their desire to be the best.

Distributing Leadership

While Ross delegated significant aspects of the school improvement plan to members of his leadership team and to grade-level leaders, the plan to formally build the capacity of teachers was foggy. Beyond the PLC format, teachers were unclear on what it meant to be a teacher leader. What was their role, many asked.

The lack of clarity undermined the power of the PLC process and disengaged many teachers from taking on more responsibility. To address this challenge, Ross and team developed clear standards for grade-level leaders and for teacher leadership in general. With clear roles in place, teacher confidence grew and as did the leadership team's ability to monitor results.

Leadership Team Meetings

Lincoln identified clear improvement strategies to move the school out of turnaround status. They also identified a clear pathway to sustain previous gains and to create even more momentum. However, the leadership team often approached planning processes informally. Leadership team meetings were often repurposed or postponed, if they happened at all. Teacher leaders did not see them as a good use of time or a meaningful part of their school improvement work.

However, several members of the leadership team were promoted to roles in central office and the Lincoln leadership team was forced to reset again. New members of the team pushed for more structure and clarity and wanted to devote year two of the sustainability program to developing strong leadership team meetings. Working alongside a UVA consultant during the second winter site visit, they began to craft an ideal leadership team meeting.

After addressing the basics of who would participate, what time, and on what day, the team began to develop a standardized agenda, communication processes between meetings, clear roles for leadership team meetings, secure alignment to PLC and data meetings, and to institute processes for monitoring results and adjusting strategy.

Results

Lincoln continues its journey towards becoming the highest performing elementary school in Ogden. After four years of focused reform, Lincoln has advanced from an F to a B (before the shift in cut scores, they had earned an A). Lincoln plans to refine their efforts in all six strategies in order to cement their achievements.

Guidance for Principals

Lincoln's secret sauce is reflected in their general improvement strategy. However, there is one piece of advice Ross would give to other principals – "don't sweat the small stuff." In retrospect, Ross believes that by staying focused on a clear set of singular goals, teacher quality and student achievement improved in tandem. His advice is to ignore everything that doesn't directly align with the end game.