



Leadership Is a Disposition, Not a Position

How Ascension Public Schools Moved School Improvement into School Culture and Mindset

Spring 2019

Summary

Ascension Public Schools, located between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, is currently an A district on the state school rating system and the number two district in the state in terms of academic achievement. This wasn't always the case.

Fifteen years ago, Ascension faced a persistent achievement gap between its high-poverty, high-minority schools and more affluent schools in the district. Ascension's school improvement plan for its lowest-achieving schools moved all of them up at least one letter grade, with several schools achieving a B rating. What enabled these schools to more rapidly improve was an investment in intensive support for classroom teacher instructional improvement through a partnership with the nonprofit National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET).

The district has refined and improved this work over the last 15 years, illustrating the importance of continuing to evolve in response to the needs of schools and students, and the outcomes of prior initiatives.

Rather than swing from one intervention or approach to another, Ascension has benefitted from a long term commitment over multiple superintendents and leadership teams to build on the work of their predecessors. Superintendent David Alexander emphasizes the importance of consistency in priorities, and balancing innovation with steady efforts to identify, sustain and replicate effective practices.

District Context & Challenges

Ascension Public Schools is headquartered in Donaldsonville, Louisiana, approximately 60 miles northwest of New Orleans. The district spans 300 square miles, and serves 22,500 students in 27 schools. Forty-eight percent of Ascension students are economically disadvantaged, and 42% are minority students.

High-need students are heavily concentrated in a small number of schools that were historically rated as D or F schools. Ascension has worked to improve student academic outcomes through a variety of strategies over the last 15 years, with an intensive focus on building the skills of classroom teachers who serve students with the greatest barriers to learning.

While high-need students experienced accelerated growth, results for all students in the district grew dramatically.

Ascension leaders defined their goal as ensuring that all students, regardless of race and socioeconomic status, have access to effective educators and quality instruction, and can achieve at high levels.

Creating a Locally Designed Solution

In the 2005-06 school year, district leaders partnered with NIET to support two high-need schools that had been identified by the state as needing improvement. The strategy focused on intensive support for classroom instruction through the elements of NIET's TAP System for Teacher and Student Advancement (TAP). TAP's core strategy is to train teacher leaders and school leaders to provide instructional support for classroom teachers through school-based professional learning and coaching.

Leaders in these two schools pursued four key strategies:

1. Creating teacher leadership roles designed to work alongside principals to build capacity in each building for instructional improvement;
2. Providing ongoing, meaningful opportunities for professional growth for classroom teachers that are job-embedded and school-based;
3. Creating a common understanding and language around strong instruction using research-based teaching standards that underlay professional learning as well as classroom observations and feedback; and
4. Establishing high expectations for teachers and principals, accompanied by strong support for improvement, with opportunities to be recognized and rewarded for excellence.

Teacher leaders were trained to observe and coach classroom teachers, and to lead weekly collaborative learning teams. As leaders of weekly learning teams, teacher leaders supported their colleagues to analyze student data, identify and apply effective student strategies and continuously improve their instructional techniques.

As principals and teacher leaders developed their own skills, and better supported the development of classroom teachers, student achievement began to increase.

"NIET school improvement practices created a culture where we can take risks to improve student achievement. We know our teachers can increase their instruction, and that improvement increases student achievement."

- Latatia Johnson, Former Turnaround Zone Principal



Scaling Up School Improvement

Success in the initial two schools led district leaders to expand the work to 14 of its highest-need schools (deemed Turnaround Zone schools) with the following results:

I. A Shared Vision of Great Classroom Teaching

The district's highest-need schools struggled to recruit and retain effective educators. One reason was that teachers were not being recognized for the growth they were able to make with high-need students. The district adopted NIET's research-based description of strong teaching practices, creating a common language and expectations for classroom instruction.

The NIET Teaching Standards, or "rubric," formed the foundation from which schools raised expectations for classroom instruction and allowed individual teachers to take more ownership of their classroom practice and skill development.

Use of clear and detailed descriptions of teaching practice also enabled the district to measure and support improvements in practice, further reinforcing the concept that teaching in its highest-need schools was improving.

With this rubric in place, Ascension was better prepared when the state passed legislation in 2012 to require the use of a research-based rubric for teacher evaluation.

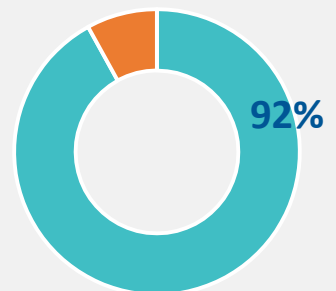
Districts could use the new state evaluation rubric – COMPASS – or select another research-based rubric. Ascension chose to use the NIET rubric for evaluation, classroom coaching, and in professional learning teams, creating a shared vision of strong teaching.

"NIET has helped us develop an organized and systematic way to have a strong system of teacher support."
- David Alexander, Superintendent

II. Better Recruitment & Retention of Highly Effective Teachers to High-Need Schools

Another barrier the highest-need schools faced was recruiting and retaining effective educators. When comparing levels of support, quality of resources and knowledge base of students, the district's more affluent schools were typically more attractive places to work and had more success in recruitment and retention.

92% of partner school leaders in Ascension report teacher retention has improved in their school.



With the increased investment in teacher leadership and skill development, teachers in the targeted high-need schools began to make significant and sustained improvements in student learning growth. This attracted the attention of their colleagues across the district, and increased the number of educators interested in working in these schools.

In addition, district leaders made a bold decision: The path for those in leadership positions to move up would be through working and excelling in one of the targeted schools. By making success working in a high-need school a priority for promotion, the district was able to draw talent to its highest-need schools. This also strengthened teacher and school leader knowledge of, and identification with, all students in the district.

III. Expanded Learning Opportunities for Educators

Based in each school, teacher leaders provided every day support for classroom teachers—in addition to leading weekly meetings of professional learning communities. This continuous support and coaching strengthened the level of instruction across the building.

In addition, teacher leaders were supported to build their own leadership skills through training, on-the-job experience in the role, and participation on the school leadership team.

Principals increased their own knowledge and skill in leading instructional improvement, and gained expertise in guiding their leadership teams to work together in achieving goals.

“NIET helped us develop a continuous cycle of reflection focused on students and teachers, which ultimately allows schools to increase student achievement.”

- Shaneka Burnett, Former Teacher Leader



IV. Alignment Between District- and School-Level Professional Learning

At the district level, central office staff played a key role in designing, supporting and prioritizing school-based professional learning. The direct involvement of district staff helped to create coherence between district-level initiatives and the work of school leadership teams. For example, working with school leadership teams to roll out new curriculum or other reforms in coordination and with the involvement of teacher leaders in each school.

Better Use of Data to Plan & Promote Equitable Access

By looking at both student and teacher needs, teacher leaders and principals are able to help teachers see connections between improvements in their own practice and their students' learning growth.

Using a detailed, research-based rubric to observe classroom instruction, principals have far more insight into what is happening in classrooms and are better able to target supports based on individual teacher needs, as well as the needs of their students. Principals now have more information about teacher effectiveness and are better able to connect more effective teachers with students needing the most support.

Sustaining Momentum & Forward Progress

Under the leadership of Superintendent David Alexander, Ascension continues to support increased growth in its highest-need schools. In 2018, Ascension ranked second in the state in the percentage of students scoring Mastery and Advanced on the grades 3-8 state assessments.

Investments in people created a structure of support that is an engine for continuous improvement. Ascension Public Schools strengthened school culture and drew talent to its highest-need schools. Successful innovations impacted schools across the district, raising achievement levels for all students.

