

When Educators Lead the Way

Teacher-Driven Change at One Boston School

BY ANNELISE EATON, JENNIFER POULOS, ALISON B. STEVENS, AND JANET ANDERSON

It's an early spring morning at the Mildred Avenue K-8 School, and only the sound of soft chatter can be heard in Danielle Neville's eighth-grade English class. Students, who have just finished reading John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*, are editing persuasive essays about the novel's central themes of oppression, community, and fate. A student in the front row passes his tablet to his neighbor, asking for feedback on the evidence he has chosen to support his essay's main argument.

In Ms. Neville's class, and in classrooms across the school, students think critically, analyze problems, ask questions, collaborate with peers, and make real-world connections across texts, math problems, and science experiments. Located in the Mattapan section of Boston—a neighborhood rich in diverse cultures but with persistently high rates of poverty—the Mildred continuously strives for academic excellence for its students.

The scholarly learning environment that characterizes the Mildred today seemed impossible five years ago, when the school was among the lowest performing in the commonwealth of Massachusetts. Between 2004 and 2013, the average

tenure for a principal at the school was just 18 months, with five new principals arriving during those nine years. With each leadership change, teachers faced shifting expectations and priorities. Though teachers were deeply unsatisfied with the education provided to Mildred students, they had little input into organizational and instructional solutions to problems at the school.



This photo and the two on the following page show students and teachers from the Mildred Avenue K-8 School.

Faced with pressure from district leadership to improve student achievement at the school, Mildred principals during this era often adopted a directive leadership style, effectively serving as school managers, and providing little opportunity for teacher voice or leadership.* Staff culture suffered and instruction lacked coherence across classrooms. School-level performance data showed that students were not mastering grade-level content. According to teachers, low levels of student engagement impacted an already tenuous school climate. Math proficiency, as measured by the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, the state's standards-based assessment program, plummeted to the 1st percentile in Massachusetts.

Given the school's poor performance, many school staff believed the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education would identify Mildred as a Level 4 "turnaround school" in 2013, a designation made by the department's commissioner to prompt intensive intervention at chronically underperforming schools, for which the Mildred met the criteria. This classification would bring a blend of additional resources to the school

but also lead to heightened accountability for school performance. When the state announced the newest turnaround schools in 2013, school and district leaders were surprised that the Mildred was not identified. With this decision made, Mildred staff faced the notion that there would be no influx of additional external resources to help the school turn around its performance. This decision catalyzed both Boston Public Schools (BPS) leadership and a team of committed Mildred teachers to drive the kind of school improvement that staff recognized was needed to ensure high expectations for learning for all students.

In the absence of state-led turnaround, teachers and district leaders employed a rarely used Boston Teachers Union (BTU) contract provision wherein teachers can form an intervention team with the support of district and union leadership.¹ Utilizing this joint labor-management model, the Mildred's teacher-led intervention team would share responsibilities for schoolwide change with district leadership. For Mildred educators, the formation of the intervention team acted as a vehicle for transformative action, with the district providing agency to a teacher-led team to drive the school's change effort. Schoolwide improvements to teacher professional culture, school climate, classroom instruction, and—over time—student achievement resulted in the Mildred being selected by EdVestors as the 2017 School on the Move Prize winner, which comes with a \$100,000 award.

A Foundation of Trust

At the Mildred, many teachers knew that the lack of consistent academic expectations across classrooms exacerbated challenges in raising student performance. Teachers were frustrated by the school's stagnant performance and challenging climate; they described these as symptoms of lackluster instructional leadership characterized by a series of attempted reforms

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*For more on teachers' roles in school decision making and school performance, see "Leadership Matters" in the Spring 2018 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/spring2018/ingersoll_sirinides_dougherty.

that principals had implemented with limited teacher input.

Drew Echelson, the BPS network superintendent responsible for overseeing teaching and learning at the Mildred and 15 other BPS schools, was interested in a new approach. He garnered support from the superintendent and BTU president to pursue a teacher-led intervention. With BPS and BTU approval, Echelson pitched the idea to Mildred staff. Echelson had high expectations for teachers at the Mildred to manage a schoolwide change process. He spent several hours each week meeting and building relationships with Mildred teachers in the 2012–2013 school year, conducting walk-throughs and providing feedback to the principal and teacher leaders. He recognized that though many highly skilled educators were among the faculty at the Mildred, the absence of shared academic expectations for students and structures to ensure instructional alignment across classrooms diluted their impact.

The intervention team model would activate existing teacher talent and integrate expertise from a select group of BPS teachers from other schools to devise a turnaround plan for the school. Mildred teachers recognized that Echelson was offering them a chance to have a say in improving their school; this approach would be different from reforms they had tried in the past. Acting as both a representative of the district and the interim principal, Echelson invited Sherry Pedone, the Mildred's BTU representative, to select three teachers to serve on the intervention team. Pedone identified teachers with leadership potential and openness to change who were also well-respected for their instructional acumen. Echelson was jointly chosen by the BTU and the BPS superintendent to chair the committee.

A Teacher-Led Plan for Action

Near unanimous votes by intervention team members led the Mildred to put together an intervention plan that requested autonomy to make decisions on school policies like structure, curriculum, staffing, budget, and professional development. With significant

prior planning already invested, both BTU and BPS leaders agreed to the intervention team's plan. Perhaps most importantly, BPS leadership acted upon all intervention team recommendations, granting the Mildred's educators significant decision-making power at a time when many district leaders may have tightened the reins on a severely underperforming school.

Though the full plan would not go into effect until the start of the 2014–2015 school year, the superintendent's willingness to grant decision-making authority to the Mildred's educators allowed staff to immediately act upon several short-term recommendations. During the 2013–2014 school year, teachers adopted high-leverage instructional strategies, including routinely using performance data from regularly occurring interim assessments to influence classroom instruction. This led to early gains in student performance. Initial successes proved critical to student and staff culture at the Mildred, creating a sense of momentum toward school improvement.

The intervention team's teaching and learning plan included bold changes to raise expectations for student learning. Schoolwide work included revisiting external/nonprofit partnerships to ensure their work aligned with the school's new instructional vision. When conducting walk-throughs across Mildred classrooms, the intervention team saw a wide variance in instructional quality and committed to deep work on classroom instruction, requiring all teachers to examine the impact of their instruction and continually refine their practice based on student data.

With the approval of the superintendent, teachers on the intervention team recommended that Echelson evaluate every member of the Mildred's staff, with only those receiving a performance rating of proficient or higher remaining at the school. The team was confident that evaluations would reveal that most of the Mildred's staff possessed the deep content knowledge, intellectual curiosity, and capacity for growth required for success in the turnaround effort. When evaluations concluded in spring 2014, about one-



quarter of the teachers received ratings below proficient based on a rigorous evaluation aligned to the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Framework.² Retaining the Mildred's effective educators would be crucial to the school's success.

With a highly effective teacher corps in place for the start of the 2014–2015 school year, hiring a principal who would collaborate with teachers through a time of rapid change emerged as a top priority. Mildred teachers on the intervention team selected a group of their colleagues for the principal hiring committee.

After interviewing several candidates, the team met Andrew Rollins, a former middle school social studies teacher who had been serving as director of operations at a different BPS K–8 school. Mildred teachers were confident that Rollins' instructional expertise and collaborative leadership style made him the best fit for the position. He was far and away the teachers' choice, and administrators—school and district alike—supported this decision.

Instructional Transformation

With Rollins' arrival in fall 2014, staff began to unite around a focus on academic rigor. A collaborative working relationship between Rollins and the teachers also proved critical. Rollins spent time getting to know each teacher and elevated the role of teacher leaders across grade levels and content areas. As teachers demonstrated expertise in specific areas, Rollins asked them to share strategies with their colleagues, creating a sense of collective ownership schoolwide.

In addition, several of the intervention team's instructional recommendations provided opportunities for teacher leadership. The intervention plan proposed 60 hours of professional development, significantly more than the district-wide allocation of 24 hours.³ Teachers on the school's instructional leadership team partnered with Rollins to determine the content and schedule of professional development sessions and to share their expertise.

The intervention plan added 30 minutes of instructional time to the school day and included an extra dose of small-group English language arts and math instruc-

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Chess and ELLs

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our students with our own strengths and resources? And most of all, have we done everything we can to show our students that they have what it takes to be champions? □

Endnotes

1. See Sergio González Rodríguez, *Huesos en el desierto* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2002).
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3. E. Natalia Strobach Oronoz, *17–18 School Climate Survey: Henderson Middle School* (El Paso, TX: El Paso Independent School District, 2018).
4. For information on programs that have successfully increased Latina involvement in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields, see Robert W. Fairlie and Rebecca A. London, "Getting Connected: The Expanding Use of Technology among Latina Girls," in *Latina Girls: Voices of Adolescent Strength in the U.S.*, ed. Jill Denner and Bianca Guzman (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 168–184.
5. Christia Spears Brown and Campbell Leaper, "Latina and European American Girls' Experiences with Academic Sexism and Their Self-Concepts in Mathematics and Science during Adolescence," *Sex Roles* 63 (2010): 860–870.

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tion for all students. In addition, the plan also ensured that students had access to science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (STEAM) activities and enrichment. Opportunities for ongoing collaboration enhanced teachers' ability to use this extra time to strengthen students' foundational skills to meet rigorous, grade-level standards.

In 2016, the Mildred Avenue K–8 School became the first school in Massachusetts' history to rise from the 1st percentile of academic achievement to Level 1 status, Massachusetts' top school performance designation. Across the commonwealth, where several turnaround schools have struggled to sustain progress through leadership turnover and other school changes, the Mildred is

an example of ongoing improvement. With a strong cadre of teacher leaders in place and a professional culture where staff share effective practices across classrooms, teachers constantly explore new ways to meet the needs of their students. Beyond their impact on classroom instruction, these factors have also led to high levels of teacher retention at the Mildred, strengthening the school's ability to continue its strong academic performance and positive school climate. □

Endnotes

1. Agreement between the School Committee of the City of Boston and the Boston Teachers Union, Local 66, AFT, AFL-CIO, contract ratified October 16, 2012, accessed July 23, 2018, www.btu.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/2010-2016-BTU-Contract-2.pdf.
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Understanding Their Language

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tent delivery, but also in terms of the content itself. Ultimately, each course component is grounded in the following educational realities: language is a core component of every discipline; content-area learning and language development happen simultaneously and should be treated as such; we are all language teachers; and, perhaps most important, to truly support students in their development, you have to first listen to their language. □

Endnotes

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