



FROM ONE LEADER TO MANY LEADERS

STONE CREEK ELEMENTARY & THE TRANSITION TO COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP



TUCKED INTO THE NORTHWEST GEORGIA MOUNTAINS,

Walker County has become an extended part of metro Chattanooga, which lies just on the other side of the state line.

Its public schools reflect its transitions and contradictions. The 20% of schools close enough to serve “bedroom community” neighborhoods outside the city have higher proportions of advantaged students. The rest, like Stone Creek Elementary, are Title I campuses serving parts of the community that have remained traditionally rural or been pushed out from the urban center due to cost of living.

Stone Creek has higher than average student mobility rates as families move among pay-by-the-week trailer parks, and larger proportions of students of color, experiencing economic disadvantage, and with disabilities. Its achievement scores and school grades have remained persistently below average. But it also boasts some of the district’s best teachers, with the highest three-year performance index of any Title I school in the county. Robust STEM, arts, and other enrichment programs boost student engagement, and teachers loop with their students to deepen academic and family supports. An in-school food pantry serves 1 in 5 students’ households weekly.

Of course, Principal Brandon Mosgrove was curious how to accelerate progress on their school improvement plan. And at the midpoint of his career, he was also beginning to think about legacy. What kind of school would he leave behind? What kind of staff could he attract to this rural, heavily impacted community to sustain the work of improvement when he eventually retired?

The answers he found turned out to be more about reimagining the school than merely improving it—but are on track to place Stone Creek on its most powerful improvement trajectory yet. But contrary to what traditional management practice might suggest, Mosgrove led the school’s changes not through intensifying his role as instructional leader and manager but by sharing that work. Collective leadership, a set of practices that engage teachers and administrators as partners in shared learning, decision-making, and execution on those decisions, has been the north star guiding Stone Creek’s efforts.



GROWING LEADERSHIP AT STONE CREEK ELEMENTARY

In early 2018, Principal Brandon Mosgrove was one of a few task force members invited to participate in a cross-state community of practice facilitated by Mira Education. Discussions he had there with fellow administrators engaged in the SC Collective Leadership Initiative led him to wonder how much more power teacher leadership could be if reframed not as an exercise only in crafting new career progressions, but also as a school improvement effort shared between teachers and administrators.

Emboldened by what he learned through his new network, Mosgrove pulled together key members of his staff and district leaders to craft a plan. Seven months later, Stone Creek began the 2018-19 school year as a collective leadership campus with a mission to “support, collaborate with, and retain highly effective teachers at Stone Creek.”

FROM INDIVIDUAL EXPERTISE TO COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

In 2017, Mosgrove was focused mostly on improving the level of instruction through professional learning—a common capacity-building approach for many schools and districts. His participation in the Georgia Teacher Leadership Task Force introduced him to research that shifted his perspective on the challenge. Building the capacity of every individual teacher was an almost impossibly intensive effort for him (or any principal) to undertake alone. But if he focused on building instructional leadership capacity among a core team that could share those responsibilities, they could support improvements in practice more effectively and rapidly. What's more, those new leaders might be more likely to remain at the school and in the classroom, thanks to new opportunities to impact students beyond those on their rosters.

Making teachers' leadership visible and supported

Mosgrove began by identifying six teachers who were already informal leaders within the building, highly effective and trusted by colleagues. He invited them into new hybrid teacher leadership roles that provided varying blends of time spent on direct instruction with students and co-teaching, professional learning, coaching, and other supports for teachers. Collaboration with the district human resources director supported ways to reassign how positions were mapped to students and available FTEs. This allowed Stone Creek to design positions needed for its school while satisfying state and district policies and staying within its existing budget and staffing allocations.

Demonstrating an expectation that everyone learns to lead

Stone Creek teachers serve in hybrid roles for two years at a time. Current teacher leaders have identified the next six staff who will step into those roles starting in fall 2021 and set up a system to prepare their replacements. A committee system brings engages administrators and a number of teachers throughout the school with decision-making, including budgeting and purchasing decisions for the school—another way to prepare future cohorts of formal teacher leaders.

Modeling "a culture of leadership" to sustain change

Moving to a collective leadership model involves not changing mindsets and habits – shifts that don't happen quickly. Mosgrove wants his staff to lead as much instructional decision-making as possible, but "I couldn't just walk out to my team and say, 'Y'all do it.' They would've left and it would've been a mess." Instead, he has gradually released decision-making to teachers over the course of the year. Teacher leader Bobbi Strickland explains, "We are used to asking, 'Can we do this?' And Mr. Mosgrove now will turn that back on us: 'What do you think you should do?' Mosgrove adds, "It would have been easier just to give an answer, but then I'm still just giving permission instead of asking [staff] to really lead with me. Doing what I've been doing makes us all feel very confident that even if I left next year, many of the changes we have all helped bring to Stone Creek will stay. Because now we all know how to lead together and figure out what will work next." Mosgrove says the goal is for teachers to check in with one another on key instructional decisions so that they operate as "one big team supporting our students," but he knows that will be a long term process.

Separating instructional and management functions

Traditional principal roles set high demands on administrative leaders to be both instructional and management experts, underutilizing effective teachers' instructional knowledge. Through collective leadership, Mosgrove draws on the expertise unique to each group of staff within the school: teachers lead instruction based on their pedagogical and content expertise, while he and Assistant Principal Leigh Davis focus on management expertise. "I want teacher leadership to be focused on the core of what we do at Stone Creek, and that's instruction and serving our students. I can take care of the business stuff [like human resources and coordinating with the district office on documentation and compliance] and they don't need to get into all those details."

KEYS TO SUCCESS



NETWORKED LEARNING AND IMPROVEMENT PARTNERS

Musgrove's participation in Catalyst—a Mira Education-convened community of practice for school, district, and state level leaders working on innovative approaches to professional learning and leadership—introduced him to collective leadership. Much of the Stone Creek staff is engaged in attending meetings and conferences beyond the school or participating in virtual networks. "I see how this kind of professional development has been crucial for Stone Creek and it would benefit all our educators to experience that kind of learning," says School Board Chair Karen Stoker.



SUCCESSFUL SUCCESSION PLANNING

Current leaders have shaped the effective design and implementation of Stone Creek's collective leadership approach. Early attention to future leaders ensures sustainability. Each teacher leader has identified a successor to her hybrid role and supports her in growing into that position over a two-year period. Then the next wave of hybrid teacher leaders will identify new informal leaders and continue rotating until "we have a staff full of leaders."



Mosgrove is also grooming Davis to take over as principal when he retires. "I want Leigh to know how to lead through teacher leadership too," he says. "Otherwise, it won't stay in place after I leave."



SUPPORT FOR A DIFFERENT KIND OF ADMINISTRATOR LEADERSHIP

Superintendent Damon Raines is supportive because he says Brandon is leading the school like he tries to lead the district. "What's right for every Walker County school can be different, school to school. I want to set a goal and challenge my principals. I'll be very clear about where we are heading and what I want to see from them but they have to figure out how to design it and do it. That is the same approach Brandon has had here [at Stone Creek]." Stoker echoed, "We have hired and placed people in roles where we think they can succeed, so we have to put our trust in our own decisions about leadership and really trust them to lead."



Want collective leadership as a part of your practice? The **Georgia Professional Standards Commission**  supports a range of teacher leadership efforts to help districts in their state begin rethinking how they engage educators as co-leaders of their schools. In other states, contact **Mira Education**  for resources, networking, and advice.

