

# Elementary School Case Studies

On April 24, 2019, these case studies were shared during the presentation **How Do Principals Influence Student Achievement? A Summary of Leadership Study Results for Practitioners** by Dr. Elaine Allensworth from the University of Chicago, Consortium on School Research. A snapshot of the research associated with this presentation is available at <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/how-do-principals-influence-student-achievement>.

## Foxglove Elementary

The primary school-wide goal at Foxglove Elementary, according to Principal Delaney, is to better understand grading practices at the school and how teachers are aligned when it comes to grading. She states, *“This year specifically we are really looking at: how are we grading kids? What are we asking kids to do and are we doing the proper footwork to get them to what we’re asking them to do? What we’ll do then from there is align the task with the grading.”* One teacher, when talking about the main goals of the school, said it was to improve and align grading practices, but other teachers mentioned different goals, including: improving test scores and meeting growth targets, looking at data to improve instruction, increasing student responsibility for their own learning, and increasing parent involvement.

At Foxglove, leadership is almost entirely decentralized. Principal Delaney described her leadership philosophy as *“putting the right people in the right place.”* She delegates many leadership tasks to different staff members, including: discipline, culture, climate, financial, and operations tasks to the assistant principal; checking lesson plans, classroom visits, teacher meetings, data analysis, and academics to two instructional coaches; attendance and social-emotional programs to a counselor and a child-family advocate; and hiring of staff members to teachers. In terms of hiring, Principal Delaney said, *“The teachers hire their own peers and they get to set up their own little department.”* Although leadership at Foxglove is distributed and staff members have ownership over various pieces of the work, there are few mechanisms in place to coordinate this work within and across groups and individuals.

Principal Delaney looks at student progress regularly. Every five weeks, she looks at student progress reports to look for trends. In grade-level meetings, she asks teachers to pull up their assignments so she can understand what they did in class and asks them why they did it that way. Coaches also look at teacher assignments, and teachers are given feedback on every assignment they share with the principal and their coaches. Principal Delaney explains: *“So they [teachers] get feedback on every single assignment they hand in, whether it’s ‘Hey, this looks great, I may do this,’ or ‘We can’t give this.’”*

Teachers work together in grade-level and subject-matter teams, which meet every 2–4 weeks, but most teachers say that they do not have a lot of time to collaborate. Ms. Kulan, one of the teachers at Foxglove, said that teachers often talk to one another during lunch periods. She explains:

*I spend a lot of time meeting with the second grade teacher, the kindergarten teacher and we have lunch together...So we have like a little mini meeting at that point. “Hey, what are the kids doing now?” “This is what we’re doing, think about getting this in sometime before the end of the year so that they’re prepared for next year.” Or I’ll talk to the second grade teacher, “This is what I’m doing now, these are going to be some of the challenges you’re going to face next year with these kids.”*

Teachers also have common prep periods that they can use to meet to talk with one another and share ideas. However, another teacher, Mr. Miller, says that the schedule is not set up for teachers to collaborate very often, so instead teachers tend to get together before and after school. He says, *“The way the schedule is set up now, doesn’t leave a lot of time for us to meet during the day so teachers are meeting with administration and with each other before school, after school, so forth.”*

Every month, students are given school-wide tasks, determined and directed by administration, and coaches monitor how students do on their tasks. When they see a student struggling, the coaches will meet with teachers to brainstorm how to help students complete the task. Outside of these meetings, teachers also work together helping students before and after school with tutoring. Teachers identify which students need extra support and then take turns offering tutoring, although the tutoring is not mandatory. Ms. Cole said that teachers regularly monitor students, but that homeroom teachers are the ones who intervene and offer supports for students:

*We try to identify students that can possibly fall through the cracks and those conversations are usually held like at our grade-level meetings.... Then that student kind of gets on our radar and we just watch that student and see what they’re doing across the different classes. So then as his homeroom teacher, [I ask] “What’s going on? Why is Miss May saying that you’re not doing this and you’re doing that?”*

Student support in the school is primarily teacher-directed and it is up to the teacher to figure out how to help the students and move them forward, with some support from coaches.

## Ivy Elementary School

The school-wide vision at Ivy Elementary is that all students will reach high academic levels. The entire staff meet in grade-level teams at the beginning of the year to set specific targets for growth on reading and math on the NWEA and attendance. Ms. Powell, one of the teachers at Ivy, said, *“We’re very goal oriented, so each grade-level team creates our academic goals for the year.”* According to Ms. Powell, teachers work in grade-level teams to create goals and *“then the whole school reviews those goals, and then we talk about how we’re going to get there.”* Thus, the teachers take the lead in creating their specific grade-level goals, and they also provide feedback on the goal-setting of other teams of teachers. Principal Walker said that because he has such a strong staff, he can *“empower them to be the ones that set goals.”* Ivy Elementary prided itself in having goals that exceeded those of the district.

Staff members at Ivy play a large role in influencing school-level decisions. Principal Walker stated that, *“whenever there are decisions to be made about the school improvement plan, or about adopting instructional materials, I make sure that teachers are involved and included in that, and I’m not making decisions in secret.”* Ms. Roman, one of the teachers, appreciates how Principal Walker empowers staff members to make decisions. She said, *“He’s one of those principals that trusts you. He values us as professionals, and I feel that he lets us make those decisions...I think that’s extremely important and makes us feel empowered.”* Thus, important decisions at Ivy Elementary are made collectively.

The school staff work together to monitor progress towards goals throughout the year. They regularly meet in grade-level and vertical-planning teams to examine data and to discuss whether or not movement has been made towards the goals they set at the beginning of the year. Ms. Monroe, a first grade teacher at Ivy, said, *“During [the vertical-planning meetings], we revisit the goals that we planned from the last visit...We talk about how we can implement those school-wide...how we can adjust our teaching.”* Principal Walker helps teachers at Ivy break down the data by student, classroom, and grade level, and evaluate whether or not the students are making progress. If students are not making progress, they all talk about what could be done to address the situation. For example, the staff identified different tiers of support for student groups. The school has a range of tutoring and other learning opportunities for students who need extra supports; individualized counseling for students with attendance issues; and extra weekend and tutoring programs to challenge top-level students. Teachers also develop lesson plans together, observe as one teacher implements the lesson, and take notes about how students responded to the lesson to discuss together afterwards.

Staff involve students in setting and reaching their own learning goals, and personalize learning as much as possible. Because of this, each student in the building is able to identify their own achievement levels and what their goals are for the year. When students meet their benchmarks, they get recognized for meeting their goals.

When students fall behind, getting Ds or Fs, or missing assignments, administrators and teachers meet with them and their parents to figure out how to get them back on track.

According to Principal Walker, one of his main leadership responsibilities is to establish and maintain the strong culture of the school. He notes that the school has a caring culture that is focused on supporting and nurturing students, where teachers get together to give each other advice about how to help students, not to complain about them. He states:

*It's like each year that I'm a principal, I realize that more and more, that the culture of the place, the interactions between adults, interactions between students and adults, the way kids see themselves, and the way they see their school, it's kind of an invisible thing to influence. And I think it's hard to directly know how to do it, but your signs, your displays, the way you interact with people, all of that, it has a really big impact.*

When asked what he would tell a new principal about what it takes to help students learn and succeed academically, Principal Walker said:

*The principal job is relationships. There's so much involved with relationships. You can be really smart; you can be able to analyze things really well, but it's a people job. You're constantly involved with building relationships with kids, with teachers, with the community, with everybody. And so, having those relationship skills and being able to know how to get along with a wide array of constituents and working with them productively to get them onboard with your vision is — that's number one.*