

2018

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**Recommended Citation**

Hartman, J.J. (2018). See the connections? Addressing leadership and supervision challenges to support improved student achievement in a small rural school. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*. doi: 10.1177/1555458917741172

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See the connections? Addressing leadership and supervision challenges to support improved student achievement in a small rural school

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## **Abstract**

This case study was developed for educational leadership courses addressing supervision and school improvement. Various data are presented for students to analyze and identify key concerns at a low-performing, rural, racially diverse, K-8 school. It challenges leadership candidates to recognize interrelated problems and solutions in a school. Students are asked to prioritize responses to issues of changing school leadership, professional development to address teacher expectations, English Language Arts achievement, instructional and disciplinary practices, student behaviors and attendance, and parent engagement practices. They will develop a specific school-wide professional development plan within an overall School Improvement Plan to address these concerns.

**See the connections? Addressing leadership and supervision challenges to support improved student achievement in a small rural school**

Located on the coast in a rural area of the northwest U.S., Foggy School (FS) serves approximately 280 students from kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade who reside in the local community of about 2500 people. A Native American reservation is located adjacent to the town and most of the Native American children attend FS. Approximately 50% of the students are White, 30% are Hispanic, 18% are Native American, and 2% are Asian or mixed race. Eighty percent of the students participate in the free/reduced lunch program and the school receives school-wide Title I funding. Twenty-two percent of the students are English Language Learners (ELLs), a population that has been growing steadily over the last several years. Approximately 13% of the students receive special education services. The demographics of the school do not completely mirror those of the community, as a charter school embracing an arts-oriented curriculum opened across the street from FS four years ago (in 2010). Many of the more affluent White children who formerly attended FS, enrolled in the charter school. Until that time, FS had been performing academically at a level similar to the state average overall.

Since the charter school opened, English Language Arts (ELA) and math achievement scores have declined every year. For the last three years, school-wide ELA proficiency rates have declined from 40% to 30%, and math proficiency rates from 47% to 40%. Specific proficiency scores by grade level for the 2010-13 school years are reflected in Table 1, and by subgroups for 2012-13 in Table 2. Average daily attendance rates are typically around 90%. Disciplinary actions (out-of-school suspensions (OSS)) by subgroup for 2012-2013 are reported in Table 3.

Teacher demographics do not reflect the student demographics; all of the teachers are White, 74% are female, and 26% are male. The school office assistant and two of the teacher aides are Hispanic. One of the custodians is Hispanic and frequently translates for parents and families. Of the 17 teachers, sixty percent have been teaching at the school for over 15 years; most of the other teachers have been teaching for at least two years, and there are two new teachers this year. The newer teachers are certified to teach ELL students, but most of the veteran teachers have obtained waivers.

The kindergarten teachers, Ms. Hopper and Ms. Folsum, are two women who communicate with each other but do not appear to work collaboratively. Both are young mothers with many responsibilities outside of school. One of the first grade teachers, Mrs. Dover, is the wife of a prominent businessman in the region, has her reading certification from the closest local university (three hours away), and has been teaching first grade for many years. The other first grade teacher, Ms. Alder, is a mild-mannered, soft-spoken woman who has a reputation as being kind, but not a strong teacher. Ms. Klein has been teaching second grade for three years and is dedicated to teaching students to read using a hybrid of phonics-based and whole language approaches, while the other second grade teacher, Ms. Riley, is new and following Ms. Klein's lead. Both are very nurturing when working with their students. Ms. Klein also tutors low-performing middle school students in reading during part of the day. The third grade teacher, Mr. Frost, has been teaching for 20 years and also manages his family's farm so he often leaves right after the students are dismissed for the day. He enjoys his students but his instruction is typically traditional and his classroom is often chaotic. The fourth grade teacher, Mr. Dale, is the union president and generally well-liked by the students, the teachers, and the wider community. He often does 'fun' projects with his students. The fifth grade female teacher, Ms. Smith, grew

up in the community, is in her second year of teaching, and is very positive and energetic with students. She volunteers her time to help in many aspects of school operations, and with extra-curricular activities.

Most of the teachers in grades 6-8 have been teaching as a team for many years. The math teacher, Mr. Thorb, is generally quiet, reserved, and seems to fit in with the middle school team. A second math teacher for the upper grades has been hired; Ms. Tanner is a middle-aged woman for whom teaching is a second career, and this will be her first year in the classroom. The ELA teacher, Ms. Roberts, is a relatively new teacher and struggling, particularly with classroom management; her disposition is often negative. The social studies teacher, Ms. Kelly, consistently comments on how poorly behaved certain students are, has strong opinions about most topics, and appears to have difficulty getting along with students, parents, and other teachers. Many of the most problematic discipline issues come from her classes or interactions with students, and numerous parents have complained about her. The science teacher, Mr. Strom, is a military veteran with the established reputation of being a teacher leader and a curmudgeon. His demeanor is gruff and he does not generally have disciplinary problems. There are three female teachers who have been providing Special Education services for a number of years, one in a self-contained classroom. In general, there is little teacher turnover, and unlike in larger districts, since there are only two schools in the district (one non-charter, one charter), the teachers who are there cannot transfer or be transferred to another school. This underscores the importance of working positively with the teachers and building their capacity to effectively teach the students who currently attend the school.

The newly hired principal, Ms. Bartlett, was previously a district-level curriculum specialist in a large school district in a different part of the state, and this is her first principal

position. She has worked extensively with schools serving low-socioeconomic status (SES) and minority students, so she is familiar with many of the challenges facing schools like FS. She is aware that the school has had five principals in the last seven years, and the last principal did not leave in good standing. In fact, when Ms. Bartlett arrived at the school in late July, it appeared that the previous principal had just walked out, as there were working papers covering the desk and multiple messages by the phone.

When Ms. Bartlett interviewed for the principal position in the spring, the superintendent emphasized the importance of consistent school discipline and maintaining order, and specifically noted that the previous suspension rate was unacceptably high. The school had collectively agreed to adopt a school-wide positive behavior and intervention system (SWPBIS), and an outside consultant was hired to provide professional development for the teachers in implementing the program at the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year. In Ms. Bartlett's first meeting with the superintendent in July, she was informed that the superintendent was leaving for a position in another district. When they met, the superintendent was packing her moving boxes to leave that same afternoon. As a result, they did not have the opportunity to discuss any of the discipline concerns from the previous years.

In August, Ms. Bartlett examined the disciplinary and suspension data from the previous year (see Table 3). There didn't appear to be a consistent system for reporting classroom discipline problems. All of the suspension data reflected out-of-school suspensions. In general, the teachers supported a zero-tolerance approach to behavior and discipline. Ms. Bartlett was concerned about the amount of time minority students were out of school due to disciplinary actions, and the impact that could have on their academic progress. In addition, she and the interim superintendent discussed the district's vulnerability to a complaint with the Office of

Civil Rights. As she began to meet and talk with teachers and others in the community, she learned that the previous principal had had a contentious relationship with the Native American community, and a more congenial relationship with Hispanic parents, in part because she was fluent in Spanish as well as in English. For many of the Native American families, multiple generations of family members have attended the school, many with less than positive experiences.

At the SWPBIS training in the fall, it became clear to Ms. Bartlett that a number of teachers (particularly the veteran teachers) did not have high expectations for the success of all students. In general, expectations for low SES and minority students' academic achievement were lower than for the more affluent, White students. Those same students were also generally perceived to constitute most of the behavior and disciplinary problems throughout the school.

After the SWPBIS training, Ms. Bartlett facilitated a faculty review of the previous years' annual standardized achievement assessment. Teachers recognized the particularly low (and declining) ELA proficiency rates, but also pointed out that many students were from low-SES homes. They commented on the lack of parental involvement and support for academic success. They also noted that that amount of classroom time spent dealing with disruptive student behaviors prevented them from providing the high-quality instruction they intended. Teachers in the middle and upper grades complained that they received students who were not prepared to learn grade-level curriculum. Ms. Bartlett ended the meeting by reiterating her belief that all students could succeed at high levels, and her commitment to work with the teachers to turn around the declining achievement scores.

The primary teachers at FS have used the whole language approach to teaching reading for a number of years. The reading certification program at the closest university is based on the



whole-language approach, and as mentioned earlier, Ms. Dover received her Master's degree and reading certification from that university. Last year the ELA curriculum was scheduled for new adoption. The state Department of Education supported a phonics-based approach to reading/ELA instruction, and neither of the state-approved curricula (which allow for purchase with state textbook funds) used the whole-language approach. The curriculum committee, chaired by Ms. Klein, led the adoption review and selected one of the state-approved instructional series. Last year the district also applied for, and received, a grant to fund a reading coach to provide professional development in the phonics-based approach to teaching reading, and implementation of the state-approved ELA curriculum which contains both summative and formative assessments that are aligned to the state standardized assessments. Since the reading grant was awarded at the end of the previous year, Ms. Bartlett will need to hire a reading coach for the coming year. When the position was posted, there were four applicants: Ms. Klein, Mrs. Dover, Ms. Roberts, and an outside candidate who has several years of primary grade level teaching experience.

The interim superintendent has made it clear that improving students' academic achievement, particularly in ELA, is his top priority. Based on the previous years' ELA declining scores, the superintendent's stated priorities, the new ELA adoption and grant award, Ms. Bartlett knows she will need to work with the faculty to develop and implement a new school improvement plan (SIP).

### **Teaching Notes**

This case study was developed for educational leadership courses addressing supervision and school improvement. Various data are presented for students to analyze and identify key concerns at a low-performing, rural, racially diverse, K-8 school. It challenges leadership

candidates to recognize interrelated problems and solutions in a school. Students are asked to prioritize responses to issues of changing school leadership, professional development to address teacher expectations, ELA achievement, instructional and disciplinary practices, student behaviors and attendance, and parent engagement practices. In their responses to the case, students are able to demonstrate their ability to analyze student data and plan related faculty professional development and support to address student and school improvement needs. They will develop a specific school-wide professional development plan within an overall SIP to address these concerns.

### Leadership for Change

In any school reform effort, building a leadership team and developing a shared vision for school success is a critical step (Kotter & Cohen, 2002; Kouzes & Posner, 2012). It is not enough for the leader to have and maintain a vision for success (though that is important); rather, including members of the school organization in developing and maintaining a shared vision needs to happen over time through shared experiences. Once the vision is collaboratively developed, the leader has a key responsibility to maintain the focus on the goals, model ongoing commitment to the goals, and support the vision by holding everyone accountable (Walberg, 2007). Collaborative leadership with a focus on learning builds an organization's capacity to change and improve (Hallinger & Heck, 2011).

Distributed leadership is described as leaders placing less emphasis on the hierarchical position of leader and engaging others with expertise to participate in guiding the organization (Bush & Glover, 2014). Considering how to develop the school leadership team and who should be a part of the team is important (Kotter & Cohen, 2002). Identifying individuals who are representative of specific stakeholders or perspectives within the organization helps to build

trust. The leadership team needs both representatives who can make substantive contributions and are committed to the well-being and achievement of students and staff (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2014). The principal needs to carefully consider how large the leadership team should be, and the method for selecting individuals to serve on the leadership team – whether through volunteers, elected representatives, selected by district leadership, seniority – or some combination of these methods. Clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of each member, and the processes for making decisions is important for the success of the leadership team (Ubben, Hughes, & Norris, 2016).

#### Teacher Development and Support - Developing a Schoolwide Professional Development Plan

Research indicates that the most effective professional development for teachers meets the following criteria: active engagement, high relevance to current instructional content and/or student challenges, ongoing over time, collaborative, collegial, and reflective (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Particularly in diverse schools, understanding how to implement culturally responsive teaching practices is critical for student success (Gay, 2002, 2013, Payne, 2008; Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2000; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001). When the race/ethnicity of the teaching staff is quite different than the student population, it is important to consider adaptations to the curriculum and teachers' instructional practices to accommodate these differences and ensure high expectations for all students (Fernald, Marchman, & Weisleder, 2013; Saphier, 2017; Singelton & Linton; 2006). To successfully implement new curriculum and instructional materials, initial whole-group training, follow-up ongoing collaboration with grade-level colleagues, and differentiated additional support for individual teacher implementation challenges are all important aspects of effective professional development (Glickman et al., 2014). Regular, structured grade level professional

learning community (PLC) meetings provide ongoing opportunities for leaders, coaches, and teachers to collaborate on implementing new instructional practices as well as reviewing formative student achievement assessment data (Bernhardt, 2003; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen, & Grissom, 2015). Peer coaching and induction mentoring can also be effective options for supporting individual teacher development (Desimone & Garet, 2015; Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009). Follow-up and on-going monitoring, such as conducting regular classroom visits and walkthroughs, helps ensure school-wide implementation of curriculum and instructional strategies (Boothe, 2013; Cervone & Martinez-Miller, 2007)

#### Addressing Student Behavior, Attendance, and Disciplinary Practices

Student attendance is positively correlated with higher student achievement, particularly for low-SES students (Ready, 2010). In addition to the implementation of a SWPBIS, there are other leadership actions that can help improve student behavior and attendance (McIntosh, Moniz, Craft, Golby, & Steinwand-Deschambeault, 2014). Conducting an analysis of disproportionate disciplinary practices at a school is a critical first step to understanding if, and what, problems exist (Boneshefski & Runge, 2014; Silva, Langhout, Kohfeldt, & Gurrola, 2015; Skrla et al., 2000; West, Leon-Guerrero, & Stevens, 2007). Recognizing that serious disciplinary actions (suspensions and expulsions) disproportionately negatively impact minority students and their attendance/achievement, it is important for administration and faculty to work together to identify alternatives to OSSs (Childs, Kincaid, George, & Gage, 2016; Skrla et al., 2000). Developing a plan for in-school suspension and productive use of students' time for continued learning is a viable alternative to OSSs (Anyon et al., 2014). Adopting a restorative justice approach in which social relationships are the focus of understanding misbehavior and repairing

damage to interpersonal relationships becomes part of the disciplinary process, could be very helpful in changing the disciplinary climate at the school (Evans & Vaandering, 2016; Fronius, Persson, Guckenburg, Hurley, & Petrosino, 2016; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). It is important for faculty and staff to proactively consider various culturally responsive ways to build more positive relationships with low SES and minority students and parents (Banks et al., 2001; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001).

Additionally, research has shown that developing and implementing student peer mediation programs can reduce disciplinary interventions. These programs train student leaders to mediate conflicts between peers, and help students resolve their own disputes. Ultimately, this leads to increased learning and a more positive school climate (Harris, 2005; Mayorga, 2010).

Schools who use multiple family engagement strategies such as communicating clearly with parents about the importance of student attendance for academic achievement, and creating classroom and/or grade level incentives for decreased absenteeism can improve attendance rates. Even conducting home visits have been particularly effective in improving attendance for students with chronic absenteeism (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002).

### Increase Family Engagement

Parent trust in the school structures and the principal has a positive effect on student achievement outcomes (Forsyth, Barnes, & Adams, 2006). That trust is built when principal behaviors demonstrate honesty, openness, benevolence, competence, and reliability (Adams, 2008).

Extensive research has shown that developing and improving school, family, and community partnerships can have a positive effect on student achievement and behavior (Epstein, 2010). Effective parent engagement implies a shared responsibility for student success

where both teacher and parent efforts are highly valued (Glickman et al., 2014). Epstein (2011) describes six aspects of schools that effectively engage in school/family partnerships. They:

- Help parents develop effective parenting skills;
- Use multiple forms of communicating with families;
- Provide multiple ways for families to volunteer and provide support in schools;
- Engage families in learning activities at home;
- Provide opportunities for families to participate in school decisions; and,
- Provide opportunities for the school and families to engage in the broader community.

#### Prioritize and Develop a School Improvement Plan

The SIP is intended to articulate specific actions to address key concerns in the school environment and provide a guide to prioritize and align resource allocation throughout the year (Ubben et al., 2016). Schools start with gathering and examining a variety of data, such as standardized achievement (disaggregated by significant demographic subgroups of students), other formative achievement data, attendance, behavior, perceptions and attitudes. Through analysis of the data, the faculty and leadership determine the most important factors that need to be addressed to improve the school and student achievement (Bernhardt, 2003). Once the goals and objectives are determined, the plan articulates the specific activities aligned to each objective, describes how the activities are interrelated, identifies who is responsible for implementing the activities, the calendar and time frame for implementation, and finally a plan for evaluating the success of the improvement plan (Ubben et al., 2016).

#### **Student Activities**

**Initial Analyses Paired-Discussion:** After reading the case study and analyzing the data presented, students will work in pairs to discuss Ms. Bartlett’s challenges at Foggy School.

Guiding questions are as follows: How would you characterize the challenges Ms. Bartlett faces at Foggy School? How would you prioritize the issue(s) that should be addressed first and why? What barriers is she likely to encounter?

**Guiding Questions for a whole class discussion:** How would you select the school leadership team (SLT)? Who would you want to include in the SLT and why? What are the roles and responsibilities of each member of the SLT? What types of issues will be discussed in the SLT?

**Individual Assignment:** Describe how Ms. Bartlett will organize professional development throughout the year to support the implementation of the new ELA curriculum, the SWPBIS, as well as support individual teacher improvement in specific challenge areas. How do the achievement and discipline data inform the planned professional development?

**Partner Activity:** In addition to supporting the new SWPBIS, describe in writing at least two other complementary leadership actions Ms. Bartlett could take to address student behavior, attendance, and teachers’ disciplinary practices. How will she address the concerns about the OSSs specifically?

**Partner Activity:** Students should read the Epstein (2010) article in *Phi Delta Kappan* prior to class session. What are the specific challenges Ms. Bartlett faces in engaging parents of different race/ethnic groups and how can she address these? In writing, describe two strategies FS could implement to increase positive family engagement in students’ learning experiences.

**Culminating Group Activity:** Working in small groups, review the issues presented and responses considered. Draft the beginning of a SIP for the 2013-2014 school year to address the top three priorities including goals, actions/interventions, resources, and an implementation

timeline. Students may examine and use their own school SIP as a model for developing their Foggy School SIP. How do the achievement and discipline data inform the development of the SIP?



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ERIC Descriptors:

school improvement leadership,

professional development,

culturally competent practices,

parent engagement

Table 1

*Student Achievement Proficiency Rates on State-Standardized Test Schoolwide and by Grade Levels, 2010 – 2013*

ELA Schoolwide				Math Schoolwide			
	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13		2010-11	2011-12	2012-13
AP	2	3	2	AP	6	5	4
P	38	33	28	P	41	38	36
PP	60	64	70	PP	53	57	60
ELA Third Grade				Math Third Grade			
	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13		2010-11	2011-12	2012-13
AP	1	0	0	AP	3	3	2
P	21	20	19	P	27	26	25
PP	78	80	81	PP	70	71	73
ELA Fourth Grade				Math Fourth Grade			
	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13		2010-11	2011-12	2012-13
AP	1	0	1	AP	4	2	2
P	24	26	23	P	36	34	29
PP	75	74	76	PP	60	66	69
ELA Fifth Grade				Math Fifth Grade			
	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13		2010-11	2011-12	2012-13
AP	2	1	2	AP	5	5	4
P	32	35	30	P	40	38	36
PP	66	64	68	PP	55	57	60
ELA Sixth Grade				Math Sixth Grade			
	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13		2010-11	2011-12	2012-13
AP	1	3	1	AP	7	6	5
P	37	34	34	P	43	42	40
PP	62	63	65	PP	50	52	55
ELA Seventh Grade				Math Seventh Grade			
	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13		2010-11	2011-12	2012-13
AP	2	3	2	AP	8	7	6
P	42	41	41	P	44	50	48
PP	56	56	57	PP	48	43	46
ELA Eighth Grade				Math Eighth Grade			
	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13		2010-11	2011-12	2012-13
AP	3	2	1	AP	9	6	6
P	42	40	40	P	46	48	52
PP	55	58	59	PP	45	46	42

*Note.* AP = advanced proficient; P = proficient; PP = partially proficient.

Table 2

*2013 Student Achievement Pass Rates on State-Standardized Test Schoolwide and by Significant Demographic Subgroups*

Demographic Group	ELA				Math			
	Valid Scores	Pass Rate	Target	Met Target	Valid Scores	Pass Rate	Target	Met Target
Schoolwide	168	30%	50%	No	168	40%	55%	No
White	85	52%	50%	Yes	85	59%	55%	Yes
Hispanic	51	8%	50%	No	51	22%	55%	No
Native American	30	10%	50%	No	30	20%	55%	No
Special Education	22	14%	50%	No	22	18%	55%	No
English-Lang. Learner	40	3%	50%	No	40	18%	55%	No
Title I	134	25%	50%	No	134	30%	55%	No

Table 3

*2013 Out-of-School Suspension Schoolwide and by Demographic Subgroups*

Demographic Group	Number	% of Suspensions	% of School Population
Schoolwide	145		
White	29	20	50
Hispanic	36	25	30
Native American	80	55	18