AMBITIOUS LEADERSHIP:
A CASE STUDY OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AT KIPP COMIENZA

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PREPARING TEACHERS TO RAISE THE BAR FOR LITERACY INSTRUCTION

By all measures, KIPP Comienza Community Prep, an elementary school in Huntington Park, California, is a wildly successful school. Though most kindergarteners start at the school well below pre-reading levels, in the first year of the Common Core–aligned Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) testing, 81 percent of third and fourth graders met or exceeded standards in English; 82 percent did so in math. The school ranked eighth in Los Angeles in overall performance (the average Los Angeles school had 33 percent of students proficient in English, and 25 percent proficient in math) and first among schools serving low-income English language learners. Even more striking, KIPP Comienza was the highest performing school in the nation on the math portion of the SBAC assessment.

And yet, toward the end of the 2015–16 school year, as KIPP Comienza Principal Shirley Appleman and her staff reviewed the school's literacy assessment data, they were troubled: Many students did not demonstrate flexible and independent reading comprehension. "When they are in fourth grade and finding the main idea is still not concrete, that's a red flag for us," Appleman said.

It was not for lack of trying. KIPP Comienza had spent years working with teachers on implementing a core set of research-based guided-reading instructional practices, including modeling reading strategies; delivering targeted, small-group instruction; and administering regular formative assessments. The KIPP Comienza "way," the school's gradual-release lesson model, had been taught to all new staff during their induction, and teachers received coaching and feedback on its implementation.

Practices Supporting Effective Professional Learning at KIPP Comienza

- **Establishing a clear instructional vision** that is focused on building independent readers, despite the challenge involved in increasing the complexity of instruction. Establishing this vision involved identifying weaknesses in curriculum and instruction, along with the root causes of these weaknesses, and creating an action plan to address them. It also involved developing a shared mindset among administrators and teachers that all students deserve and need this kind of learning.

- **Structuring the school schedule** to dramatically increase the amount of professional development time teachers have to plan for the next school year.

- **Maintaining a responsive vision of professional development** that includes not only workshops but also frequent collaborative team meetings. School leaders are active learners in all phases of professional development, participating in rather than facilitating sessions on material that is new to the school, and observing and giving feedback on teacher collaboration.

- **Designing practice-centered professional development** so that sessions are organized to consider the layers of work to be done: aligning mission and vision, and planning curriculum, lessons, and assessments. The content of the sessions includes modeling and practice.

- **Holding teachers accountable for their planning and execution,** which involves instructional leaders reviewing teachers' unit plans and assessments during initial the professional development cycle so that they understand what teachers know and where they need assistance.

In the spring of 2016, however, the school's leadership realized the issue went beyond fidelity to the instructional model: Students lacked a love for reading. Through classroom observations, Appleman and her deans noticed that even teachers were not showing an excitement for books; they were too focused on getting students to complete reading-comprehension worksheets. Driven by the concern that teachers were "spoon-feeding" students, Appleman and her team decided they needed to make literacy instruction less worksheet-driven and more student-centered and "authentic."

"I want to see kids with books in front of them. That's so much more engaging than reading a passage on a piece of paper," Appleman said.

Added a dean, "We want [students] to be the ones who are doing the heavy lifting in reading, doing that critical thinking, and being able to, yes, answer questions on a test, because that's life, but also to have that love of reading, to be able to go across genres flexibly and really be responsible for their own learning and reading, as well."

To achieve this goal, Appleman and her leadership team decided to adopt the Teachers College Reading and Writing Workshop model as the school's core approach to literacy instruction. Previously, literacy instruction had given primacy to small-group guided instruction and a skills-based reading comprehension block. The new model would emphasize student choice, greater teacher–student conferencing, and reading books rather than excerpts, all of which would be new for most teachers at the school. The team had to create time in the schedule for independent reading blocks and for composing and sharing writing. To prepare for this shift, Appleman and her leadership team devised a professional development plan that would support all teachers in making instructional changes.

Though school leaders and teachers alike embraced the proposed change, taking on this work did create some anxiety. The leadership team had decided to fully implement the new model in the fall, accepting that there might be setbacks in performance as they worked to master the program. "It's hard because we're used to succeeding at things, and the reality is, this is probably not going to roll out and everybody succeeds at it the first few weeks," Appleman said. "We have to be okay with that. This is going to get messy, and it's a little scary, but to get to the place where we want to be, we have to do this."

Getting messy, though, requires significant organization. To ensure the professional development would "stick" with teachers, Appleman maintained several essential practices, as described in the inset on the previous page.

ESTABLISHING A CLEAR INSTRUCTIONAL VISION

Observation of classroom instruction clearly indicated the need for more challenging instruction that asked students to take greater ownership of their learning. "Just anecdotally — looking at our kids and walking through classrooms — our students are super compliant. They do what we tell them," Appleman said. "We ask them to read. They read . . . But we don't really say to children, 'Oh, my God. This book. This series. I want to sit down and read it,' because instruction has always just been so paper/pencil based."

While the school's literacy instruction model — focused primarily on guided reading and skills instruction — was comprehensive, it was not necessarily in line with the school's vision and the principal's teaching philosophies. Still, changing it had not been a priority because, for the past two years, the school had focused its professional and curriculum development on improving its math program. Now, with "everything else in the school in a good place," the school could turn toward realizing its vision of cultivating flexible, resilient, and invested readers. The school started by explicitly articulating a vision and goal for literacy teaching and learning: that students would be reading to understand the world around them.

Though some teachers had been experimenting with the pedagogies involved in the Workshop model, staff knowledge and capacity heading into the initiative was limited. Thus, Appleman and her team began by envisioning what they wanted instruction to look like two years down the road — which allowed them to determine what their expectations should be and what coaching and feedback should look like. The leadership team rallied around several key instructional principles — more independent reading practice, more teacher conferring, more discussion, and more authentic assessments of students' comprehension — that they then codified in a vision statement and lesson model: "Mini-lessons, guided practice through conferencing and partner work, independent practice, and a platform for students to share their work as developing readers." Collaborating with teachers, Appleman and her team expanded the vision statement to include explicit expectations for both teaching and learning practices, including a set of expectations for what students in all classrooms should be able to say, know, and do inside of workshop time (e.g., "how to share about what they read").

Given the scope and urgency of this vision, a new approach to implementation was needed. Previously, improvement efforts at KIPP Comienza had been put in place gradually. New initiatives had been rolled out through small pilots and through the school's delegation of curriculum responsibilities, with each teacher in a given grade responsible for developing the daily plans for one content area. This time, however, the leadership team decided that every teacher needed to become an expert on the Workshop model, and it dedicated the entirety of its two-month intensive planning time in the spring to learning and planning for the new approach. (Each spring, KIPP Comienza students are dismissed early every day to give teachers an additional 75 minutes of collaboration and professional development time to prepare for the next school year. The schedule change is written into the school calendar at the beginning of the school year to give families ample notice.)

Getting the staff calibrated to the vision was the first step. Before beginning professional development with a Reading and Writing Workshop consultant, Appleman and her deans introduced the idea and the rationale behind the shift to teachers. The teachers agreed that a change was needed. "Our staff asked for this," Appleman said. "They want students to be able to engage in these types of activities. We decided just to go with it." They spent the first week of teacher development reviewing the school's mission, sharing the rollout plan, and reviewing feedback on existing plans.

Building buy-in, though, was only the first phase of a seven-week professional development plan that Appleman and her team mapped out to realize their vision. The schedule, seen in Exhibit 1, took the staff step-by-step through the introduction of Reading Workshop, first giving staff an overview of the process, then having a consultant model core practices, and finally giving teacher teams time to grapple with and plan the first cycle of lessons for the next year. Concrete deliverables were tied to each step to ensure staff members were ready for implementation at the start of the next academic year.

EXHIBIT 1. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SCHEDULE

Week		Meeting Date	Content	Deliverables	Due
1	May 2–6	Monday, May 2	• Overview of process • Edit/update SOP • Edit/update calendar plots	• Edit/update SOP (C1–C5) • Edit/update calendar plots (C1–C2)	May 9
2	May 9–13	Monday–Thursday	RC: Emma Graves PD (all LTs participate)		
3	May 16–20	Monday–Friday	Collective work time: Teachers can work together as a grade level	2 weeks of RC plans due to reviewer (RC planner will get and administer feedback)	May 20
4	May 23–27	Monday, May 23	Expectations for assessments, LPs		
5	May 31–June 3	NA	Teachers work on their own		
6	June 6–9	Tuesday, June 7			
7	June 13–17	NA	Teachers work on their own		
8	June 20–22	NA	Teachers work on their own	Cycle 1 lesson plans for all subjects	June 22

DESIGNING PRACTICE-CENTERED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The school took several steps to ensure that the new approach drew upon successful previous efforts and the support infrastructure already in place. To better understand which aspects of the existing reading program should stay and what had to change, Appleman had her staff review instructional plans with the consultant, who assisted them in adapting existing pacing guides and units to match the new model. "There is good work that has been done, so we don't want to just say, 'Throw it all away,'" Appleman said. The consultant worked with teams to determine what that good work was. Meanwhile, the deans began to immerse themselves in the Workshop model so that they could support teachers and give the right kind of feedback. They also began to plan for how to fill out teachers' classroom libraries to ensure there were enough books to appeal to students' varied interests.

Still, there were gaps in teachers' knowledge of instructional practices that are central to workshop pedagogy. The biggest roadblock to success, as Appleman saw it, was a lack of teacher knowledge and experience. The mini-lessons the teachers would be doing were similar to what they already did, suggesting an easier transition. Indeed, a great strength of educators across KIPP Comienza, as evidenced in observations of the school prior to the implementation of the new literacy instruction model, was focused, clear, teacher-directed instruction, particularly modeling. But the school's dean of instruction foresaw teachers struggling with unstructured group work and extensive discussions — with "making sure at the end of the week that they're still showing mastery, even though it's not the same way of getting to mastery." These were elements of instruction that had not been prioritized in previous professional learning.

To build teachers' pedagogical knowledge, the leadership team — along with their external consultant — designed professional development that modeled the teaching and learning they would expect teachers to carry out with their students. The instructional leaders wanted to create structured opportunities in which "teachers are doing the work to build their own content knowledge," explained one dean, noting the need for staff to become more metacognitive and intentional about what made them expert readers. With the consultant, they created sessions that would position teachers as learners, taking teachers through the process of selecting a text, identifying a skill they needed to develop, and "spying on themselves as readers." Appleman had her instructional coach open the first professional development session with an activity on finding the main idea. She read a paragraph that was extremely dense and hard to comprehend, modeled

how she wanted the teachers to identify the main idea, and then had them read the rest of the text and find main ideas. "Everybody was like, 'This is hard.'" said Appleman. "This is how our kids feel, when we move text out of their reach — it's boring and difficult, causing disengagement." That activity, she said, got at the "why" behind the work.

Subsequent activities during the week included the workshop consultant modeling what a mini-lesson is supposed to look like and demonstrating how teachers can transfer skills to students over the course of a week. Teachers debriefed the exemplar, then looked at their own plans to begin to chart how to adapt their mini-lessons. Videos of instruction were also shared with the group, who discussed what they observed and compared it to their own classrooms. Homework for the week included teachers reading complex texts of their own choosing; at the outset of the next day's session, teachers spent the first few minutes discussing their understanding of the readings.

Teachers also examined several representations of revised instructional plans, including a revised pacing chart and new weekly schedules and progression. One session during the week, for instance, was devoted to a walk-through of the new weekly calendar, a lesson sequence which required teachers to deliberately move from skill modeling at the beginning of the week to more time for independent work, and a transfer assessment at the week's end. Working together in grade-level teams, participants compared their old weekly structure with this new approach, and practiced planning with sample content in order to get a feel for working with the workshop structure before they embarked on planning for the next academic year.

INCORPORATING AMPLE TIME FOR COLLABORATION INTO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
Subsequent weeks of the professional learning cycle were dedicated to collaborative planning within grade-level teams to create launch plans for the next school year. The goal of this planning work, Appleman said, was twofold: (1) to set conditions and initiate structures that allow for greater student choice and engagement, and (2) "to make sure that everyone who's teaching reading, or has the possibility of teaching reading or literacy to our students, is a content expert."

The additional 75 minutes of grade-level planning time provided for nine days (grade-level teachers were already meeting for 50 minutes daily to monitor existing instruction) allowed teachers to discuss how to apply the professional development learning in their own classrooms, and to plan the initial month of literacy lessons for the next school year. The school had never done work of this kind before, so the leadership team initially allowed teacher teams complete freedom in choosing their planning focus and process. Because the school already had teacher teams in place with clear expectations for planning time, and instructional leaders followed clear protocols for leading data-focused team meetings, the teams were able to productively use these planning meetings to problem-solve together. As befits a staff with diverse talents and personalities, teams took a variety of approaches. Some teams continued with planning individually, stopping at the end of each session to get feedback on progress; other groups worked collectively, focusing on developing a common pacing guide.

In both cases, teachers immediately noted that enacting a more intensive literacy program was challenging. The first day of planning, the teams took time to try to figure it out, asking, "What do we need, and how are we going to do it?" Without the previous structure of backward planning in place, teams struggled with how to get started. Some continued to grapple with what "authentic" meant pedagogically; others were confused by

how to articulate the new elements inside of time structures that stayed the same. "They had this moment of, 'Well, I don't know what to do because no one's told me exactly what I'm supposed to do,'" Appleman said.

These struggles were particularly acute with assessment design. Having built routines around starting with the end in mind (i.e., the assessments), and having based them off the design and language of the SBAC assessment, teachers were struck by the complexity of now trying to make these assessments authentic. "We really are learning as we go," said one teacher.

After observing and hearing from teachers about their frustrations, the instructional leadership team was quick to respond. One of the deans took on the task of creating a set of criteria for designing assessments, drawn from both the school's previous criteria and guidance received in the professional development sessions. Collaboration time was reorganized so teams could concentrate on assessment design, and so instructional leads could be present to provide support. The challenges teachers experienced also compelled the leadership team to define more clearly what it meant by "authentic," and to have more professional development sessions on that subject so staff were aligned in their vision and had a common language. The leadership team also decided to focus on that issue over the summer, so that they were fully prepared to roll out the Workshop model when the next school year started.

With clearer criteria in place, teams concentrated on redesigning their formative assessment systems to match the pacing guide and the new standards for literacy learning, drawing on their previous assessments and item banks to build out new instruments. They also continued to use the daily 75 minutes of planning time through the end of the school year to individually and collaboratively plan the first month of the next year, often using one another as sounding boards for text selections and activities. By the end of the school year, teachers had produced four weeks of instructional plans, which the instructional leads collected to review and provide feedback on.

HOLDING TEACHERS ACCOUNTABLE FOR PLANNING AND EXECUTION

Appleman wanted to make a full transition to the Workshop model in time for the start of the next school year. Thus, teachers were required to complete key deliverables from their collaborative work, and the administration carefully monitored progress. The leadership team asked teachers to create launch plans before the end of the school year: All teachers had to submit their first three weeks of plans by the end of May and submit plans for the remaining weeks of the first unit by the end of the school year. These deadlines allowed the administration to provide individualized feedback and coaching over the summer so that teachers could revise and refine the lessons prior to the start of the school year. They also gave the leadership team a chance to determine the professional development focus for the coming year — based on areas of need observed in the plans — and to determine who might need additional coaching or assistance.

The administration provided responsive feedback and support during the professional development. As noted earlier, the instructional leadership team responded quickly to challenges faced during the collaboration period, adapting due dates and deliverables for each teacher team based on progress. The deans and coaches regularly sat in on teacher team meetings, providing feedback and clarity. Appleman and her deans also gave the consultant daily feedback and suggestions on her professional development sessions based on the leadership team's observations, and the school deans worked with her daily to improve her facilitation plans.

Ultimately, the school was aiming for more than just a head start on the next school year. Appleman and her team wanted to create an environment that enabled risk-taking and gave teachers the opportunity to learn from the new model. Though Appleman recognized the risk that students might struggle more, and that assessment scores might decline as they rolled out the new instructional model, she was willing to

accept these challenges in service of serving students better. She planned to reassure staff that it was O.K. if students initially did not do as well as they did previously on assessments, "because we are doing this differently." Still, she added, they would need to determine if and when they needed to adjust their approach. "We don't know if it's working if the assessments aren't showing that it is," she said.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What stands out to you as different or exemplary about this school's approach to professional development and instructional improvement? How does it compare to efforts at your current or previous school(s)?

Based on this case, in what ways can vision-setting help inform the planning of high-impact professional learning?

What were the foundations or critical conditions established at KIPP Comienza that ensured follow-through and accountability for teachers' learning?

Throughout this case study, the staff engaged in productive struggle. Identify two times when the staff faced a challenge with implementing a new literacy curriculum, and describe how they were able to overcome that challenge. Was the challenge worth the outcome?

Though not the case at KIPP Comienza, limited time and resources are cited as constraints by many schools when it comes to enacting and sustaining impactful professional development. Brainstorm ways you could use existing time in the schedule for practice-based professional learning.