CASE 10. Managing From the Middle

Key Concept: Leading Among Peers and Principals

Data Team Meeting

Two young 5th-grade teachers, each carrying a heavy three-ring binder, chatted as they entered the school's curriculum office, seeming not even to notice the message posted on the white board outside (see Figure 10.1).

"Welcome, ladies!" called the principal from the table near the humanities facilitator's desk. "How is your week going?" Notebooks and papers surrounded a small basket of candy in the center of the table. She peered over her reading glasses at them.

"Evidently Hillary is having an active social life in the evenings while I lead the dull stay-at-home life of a new parent!" said Michelle Thomas, smiling, as they settled at the table. Although Michelle was in her seventh year of teaching, this was her first at Paint Creek Elementary, so she was still relatively new to the weekly data team meetings. The teachers opened their notebooks and starting rifling through papers. Hillary Cole reached for the stapler and began collating and stapling packets of data sheets. Michelle passed copies of her Data Form (see Figure C10.2) to the principal, assistant principal, and humanities facilitator, who were seated around the table, and placed packets at the empty spaces in front of two chairs. "Are Jose and Robin joining us?" asked Michelle, looking around.

"We're here! Sorry we're late," said Robin Arends, a 4th-grade teacher, as she entered the room. "Jose is right behind me. We had to get our papers from the copier."

"OK," replied the humanities facilitator, Nonie Costanza. "Let's get started, though. I assume you all received the agenda we sent out last Friday? It's posted here on this chart paper in case you need a reminder." Nonie gestured to the wall behind her. "Since we're starting our first week of the math cycle, we'll start with what you were doing six weeks ago."

"We ended that data team cycle," clarified the principal, Deborah Svitski, "and now we're going to review your progress since you set those earlier math goals. Then we're going to go on to page one of the

Data Forms that you prepared for today, and we will consider your current data to plan forward to your next math goals. Is everyone clear on what we're doing today?"

The teachers nodded. As Hillary reached for a candy from the basket, Jose Sparks entered the room, dropping a couple of sheets from the cluster of papers under his arms. He sat down and began distributing data packets to others at the table as Nonie passed out copies of Hillary's Data Form from an earlier meeting.

"You'll want to take a look at Hillary's work from our last session," noted Deborah. "It's a terrific model, really excellent." Hillary glanced up and caught Jose's quick glimpse at Robin.

"Hillary, would you be willing to share with the staff at our faculty meeting on Monday how you prepared that Data Form? I think others would find it helpful to hear how you approached that. Let's chat about that tomorrow," Deborah said and smiled, as Nonie handed a paper to Jose.

Paint Creek Elementary

Deborah was in her fourth year as principal of Paint Creek Elementary School, but she was an experienced school leader. Twice she had earned "blue ribbon" recognition from the state for student gains at the suburban schools that she had previously led. This was her first principalship at an urban school, a challenge she was eager to take on later in her career.

Paint Creek Elementary, situated in a large, midwestern, urban district, has gone through bumpy times. Four years earlier, in response to persistently poor student performance, the district fired the former principal and hired Deborah, who was given the autonomy to hire an entirely new staff and to choose the curricular programs she felt would ensure improvements in student performance. The superintendent expected that Deborah would be able to translate her earlier suburban success to turning around this failing school.

Although many teachers at that time had accepted the option to transfer to other district schools, some were intrigued with the re-visioning of the school and applied to be rehired by the new principal. In the end, Deborah retained two members of the previous staff and then hired all new teachers—new to the school and new to the profession—stating that "new teachers don't bring the same baggage with them that more experienced teachers bring."

Currently, the school had full enrollment with 370 students, the majority of whom were identified as Hispanic (72 percent). The remaining students crossed Native American, White, Asian, and African American subgroups. Seventy percent of the students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch and 12 percent were classified as English language learners (ELLs). Most of the teachers were hardworking and open to new approaches, two criteria Deborah used in her hiring. She knew there would be challenges ahead of them, given all new curriculum programs, inexperienced teachers, and the central administration's recent emphasis on data-based decision making.

Last year, the district had provided training for administrators in data-based inquiry and decision making. This year, with the goal of ensuring that improvement efforts were being driven by evidence of student learning, the district had mandated that principals establish a process for implementing data teams in their schools. Deborah and Clarisse Faretra, the assistant principal, had decided to modify the district's suggested data team process to make it practical and systematic for Paint Creek. "The process they wanted us to use," Deborah had noted, "was just totally untenable."

Instead, the administrative team created a weekly data team schedule where each grade level would meet with the administrators for 45 minutes on a six-week data team: two weeks focused on reading, two weeks on writing, then two weeks on mathematics. Teachers were to prepare for data team meetings in advance using their Data Form as a guide, which the administrators had modified from the district's materials. The form emphasized the compilation and analysis of data and graphs in the first week and, in the second week, the formation of SMART[1] goals related to instructional interventions for a targeted group of students.

Both Deborah and Clarisse were adept with data analysis. Clarisse, in particular, showed an affinity for organizing and interpreting the many sources of data that the school now had—the result of Deborah's advocacy for implementing programs and assessments that allowed teachers to monitor students' progress. Last year, they had trained teachers in how to administer these assessments. This year, teachers were expected to bring their questions to the administrative team prior to the data team meetings if they were struggling to interpret any data or create reports or graphs. Invariably, teachers sought out Clarisse because they felt she explained the data patiently and clearly. Although teachers expressed high regard for

Deborah's leadership, they were often somewhat tentative around her. As one teacher noted, "She's an excellent principal and I really respect her, but she can be a bit frightening because her expectations are so high. I am always kind of afraid that I'll let her down."

Nonie had been a guidance counselor in a different school and was new to the humanities facilitator role at Paint Creek. She was generally perceived by teachers as less threatening and definitely less skillful. Nonie was responsible for coaching teachers in English language arts (ELA) planning and instruction. She often supported the newest teachers in their classrooms and facilitated peer observations, by Deborah's request.

Pushback in Data Teams

"Well, my last SMART goal was related to math computation," Jose began, in response to Deborah's question about student progress during the past six weeks, "so I've been doing a lot of stuff related to that." Jose, a third-year teacher, was one of the few men on staff. "I adjusted our class work based on how my kids did when they used the ALEKS[2] computer program. So I had kids doing multiplication, division, addition, and subtraction in class based on the kind of stuff they were showing they had trouble with in ALEKS, so we kind of practiced that way."

"Did you have a target group of students for last time that you were focusing on, do you recall, or was it your entire group?" asked Nonie.

"No, these are only the kids that I specifically see for math after we regrouped the high 4th graders into my class and the lower 4th graders into Robin's class," replied Jose.

"So you've got about half your kids proficient and half your kids partially proficient, the way I am reading it, right?" asked Clarisse, looking at the data sheet Jose had distributed.

Jose described the results further. "Fifty-five percent of them were above where they need to be in computation for the middle of the year, so it's good to see they are making gains. They're struggling with measurement, though, and patterns and functions. There's not much on those in our math textbook, so that is something I'm considering touching on with my next SMART goal."

"So how does that relate to the power standards[3] that we've identified as a school?" asked Deborah, looking up from Jose's data sheet.

Jose faltered. "Well, I didn't look at those enough when I was doing my initial prep, but I can when I do the work for next week."

"I think that you should do some comparison on how your students are doing related to those power standards," responded Deborah. "Are the vast majority of your students proficient in those particular 4th-grade math standards?"

"Well," said Hillary, "you do know a little about Standard 6.1A—the conceptual understanding in subtraction, addition, and multiplication—because of your ALEKS results, right, Jose? So 55 percent of your students should—"

"Well, right," Clarisse interjected. "He knows from that test that 55 percent of his kids scored 50 percent or above on that. But I would also—just knowing how you and Robin have divided the students—just another observation of *mine* would be that Jose has the strongest half of 4th grade. And 45 percent of *his* students are only partially proficient. So what can we do to get that 45 percent to proficient, because that would be the goal. Since your group is the strongest, Jose, then the hope would be that 90 percent of them would be proficient to have a chance of 50 percent of *all* of the 4th graders attaining proficiency on the state exam, as an overall rating. So what's going to give the biggest bang for the buck with your nine partially proficient students to get them proficient in 4th-grade standards?"

The discussion continued around the 4th-grade data. Jose receded from the conversation, apparently studying his data sheets as others debated the needs of his students.

Robin then raised her voice. "Well, *that's* the question because it seems like we've done a lot. I mean, they go out to the math intervention program two to three times a week. They're sitting in the computer lab doing the ALEKS program twice a week. They are practicing computation on their whiteboards for the first five to ten minutes of math time before every whole-group lesson. You know, it's like, what *else* can we do to improve it? I don't understand, with everything that we do already, how I still only have four out of eleven in my class who are proficient in computation. So that's kind of the frustration: where do we go from here to be able to get them to that point?"

"We have to determine which *one* of those activities is yielding the kind of results that you would expect to see and which aren't," Deborah responded. "You have printed out detailed reports from the math intervention assessment and the ALEKS program, right?" Robin nodded, as the team looked through the copies of data reports that Jose and Robin had distributed.

"Do they understand inverse operations?" asked Clarisse. "It looks like they can do addition, but not subtraction, and they can do multiplication, but not division. Have you looked at that?"

"As Clarisse is suggesting, you'll need to mine the data more closely and observe students doing their work to parse out where things are breaking down. So it is not time *in* a certain activity that matters so much as whether that time is yielding the kind of learning you would expect and how should we adjust it." Deborah paused. "Let's move on to the 5th-grade team because they may well have some ideas for us. This is usually an area of strength for you, Hillary."

"Yes, well, not this time," chimed in Hillary. She and Michelle reported a similar inability to move many of their students into proficiency with math computation. Hillary noted that after she had returned from medical leave that fall, most of her students were still in the same place in math computation as when she had left.

"I'm getting some movement now," Hillary added. "But at first I noticed that assistants were not using the ALEKS program correctly with students. I had to make time to really watch what the assistants and kids were doing. I did a lot of managing and monitoring in the lab. But anyway, aside from computation," she commented, shifting the discussion, "I noticed that my students did more poorly on constructed-response questions, and measurement was an area of struggle, too, probably because the math program doesn't spend much time on that, like Jose said. So, thinking ahead, I'd like to focus my next SMART goal on constructed response and try to integrate that with measurement work."

"Mm-hmm, makes sense," Nonie remarked.

"OK, thank you," remarked Deborah, scanning Hillary's Data Form. "Terrific analysis here. Michelle, how about you?" she asked, looking up. Jose looked momentarily surprised and glanced quickly at Robin.

The conversation moved to Michelle, who reported the same student performance trends and goal interests as Hillary, and this portion of the data team meeting moved ahead without question or further direction. Both 5th-grade teachers indicated that they were ready to write their next SMART goals. When Nonie asked the 4th-grade team if they needed additional help before drafting their SMART goals, there was a pause.

"Jose? How about you?" asked Nonie.

"I've got the data I need, mm-hmm," he responded, his gaze still down.

"OK. To identify some students to target and to write your SMART goal?"

"Yeah." He nodded as the teachers packed up to get their students from recess.

The Administrative Debrief

"Shall we talk for a minute before the 3rd-grade teachers arrive for their data team meeting?" asked Deborah once the 4th- and 5th-grade teachers had left the room. Nonie went to close the door while Clarisse sat back from the table.

"Uh, I didn't want to get on Jose's back . . . but I did want Jose and Robin to notice that 45 percent of their highest kids are not proficient!" Clarisse said, eyebrows raised.

"No, I think we have to, when we see it. We can't just let it slide. We have to pop up with 'Look at this, are you noticing?'" Deborah replied.

"Yeah, 'cause he was saying, 'Well 55 percent of my kids are proficient.' Well, that's not exactly accurate; 55 percent of your *highest* kids in the entire 4th-grade are proficient! I'm not convinced their grouping strategy is working."

"We need to ensure that we're moving those students," Deborah noted. "He seems to come to these meetings half-prepared. He's copying material minutes before the meeting, he hasn't looked at the power standards, and he's missing the boat when it comes to interpreting his data."

"I know Hillary has helped the two of them look at their data, too," added Clarisse. "You know, I noticed the other day that Jose's student absentee rate is consistently higher than Hillary's, too. I wonder what's going on there."

"Is that about the quality of instruction or something else?" Deborah asked. "Did Robin and Jose ever get into Hillary's room to watch her teach a computation lesson like we discussed last week?" she asked, looking at Nonie.

"Jose did, but Robin was absent when we had scheduled the visit. I know Hillary met with Jose after school to talk about the observation."

"Hillary has really got it," noted Deborah. "It's tremendous, really. She is so far beyond the others. Her instruction is differentiated and appropriately challenging. You can see the level of planning and analysis she brings to the work. She's an eighth-year teacher, but I

think many of the other teachers are just still working at the surface. Too much whole-group work."

"That reminds me," added Clarisse, "I need to make copies of Hillary's Data Form and send that out to all the teams. It's such a good model of how to do this analysis and prepare for data team meetings."

"I've heard teachers say how helpful it is to see these exemplars," Nonie commented. "The 3rd-grade team brought some good Data Forms last week, too. Let's send those out also. Suzie's is strong, and she's only a third-year teacher."

"Some are beginning to catch on. I think we really need to push on the quality of Jose's data preparation, though." Deborah sighed. "I think he is just not putting in the time. Has he come to you for support at all? And Nonie, can you set up another observation so Robin can get into Hillary's room? Not just anytime; she really needs to see a differentiated computation lesson."

"No, no, Jose hasn't come by," Clarisse responded, "but his lessons are improving. That's the good news!" she added as the 3rd-grade team entered the room.

Teacher Hall Talk

"I don't get it," remarked Robin. It was the end of the school day and she was talking with Jose at the end of the upstairs hallway between their two classrooms. "Was it my imagination or did we describe the same results as Hillary today at data team? I mean, we're all having trouble getting kids to proficiency with their computation skills."

"I like Hillary, I really do," Jose lowered his voice. "She's an amazing teacher. But for some reason, she can do no wrong in the administration's eyes. It's unbelievable."

"I mean it's helpful to see her Data Forms, but I'm getting sick of her elite status. It's always like, 'Can't you be more like *her?*'" Robin grimaced.

"I observed in her classroom the other day when you were out," Jose continued. "It was a good lesson. But to be honest, I didn't see any difference between her lesson and how I usually teach it. And we're getting the same results—kids are not getting computation!" Jose raised his arms in exasperation.

They looked down the hallway to see Hillary give them a wave as she finished a conversation with a student who had missed her bus. She headed toward them.

"Hey, I just wanted to say," started Hillary, "I felt really badly for you guys at data team today. I mean, it seems like they are just on your case. I'm having some of the same issues with computation. It's just a really hard hump to get over for our 4th graders." She paused. "Watch your kids in the computer lab, though, when they're using ALEKS. It's interesting. Some of the kids are just gaming the system while others pay no attention to the instructional prompts. They just punch in an answer and aren't engaging with the content."

"But what I don't understand," Jose replied, "is how you can tell just about the same computation results that we do at data team and then just say, 'Oh, and I'm going to write a SMART goal about *constructed response* writing!' What's up with that?!"

Hillary laughed. "They just seem to let me plow ahead. I don't know."

The daylight was fading outside of their classrooms, and the teachers agreed they needed to wrap up and head home.

"I'd be happy to look at your data with you before next week's meeting, if you'd like, to see if we can come up with a SMART goal that will satisfy Deborah."

"I don't know. Maybe. No, I don't know. Thanks, but let me look at my results again," replied Jose.

Hillary started back down the hall, feeling the pinch of being recognized for her success with students, on the one hand, but feeling the distinct discomfort of being held up as an example for her colleagues. Although she liked having a relationship with the principal where she knew she was trusted and respected—it provided her with a lot of latitude and opportunities for influence—it created special difficulties for her relationship with her colleagues.

"Hey, one other thing," Jose said. Hillary turned to look back at them.

"Deborah sent an email saying that she is holding open office hours this week. She said anyone could come and just talk about their concerns, suggestions, whatever. I wouldn't go on a bet because she obviously hates me. I assume you're going though, right?"

"Michelle said she wanted to go. She wanted to give some feedback on the Data Form, but *only* if I went with her, so . . ." shrugged Hillary.

"Well, see if you can get across that the amount of time it takes to prepare for data team is *ridiculous.* It takes us like two hours every week."

"At least," added Robin. "I mean, I'm running around on data team day, making copies of all of this *paper.* Sometimes I have to give

my kids busy work so I have time to finish looking at the data because I know Deborah and Clarisse are going to grill me. It's way too much. I could make more progress if I just had time to teach the kids!"

Hillary shrugged. "It takes me less time, but I've been doing it awhile. One of the other teachers told me that she brought this up with Clarisse last week and do you know what she said?" Hillary paused. "'*What?!*'" she mimicked Clarisse. "'There's *no* way preparation should take you more than 30 minutes a week!' That's what she said!"

It was now 4:15 p.m. and the teachers were headed home. As Hillary walked to her car, she wondered how she should raise Jose's issue with the administration, or *if* she should. And she needed to think through her response to Deborah's request about discussing her Data Form at the next staff meeting.

"On some days," she muttered, shaking her head, "it seems to come from all directions."

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References

1. SMART is an acronym adopted from business that delineates the criteria of a well-written goal: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-bound.
2. ALEKS is named here only as an example of an adaptive computer-based math instruction and assessment program. We take no position on the effectiveness of the program itself.
3. Power standards "are *prioritized* standards that are derived from a systematic and balanced approach to distinguishing which standards are absolutely essential for student success from those that are 'nice to know.' . . . Once the Power Standards are identified through school and/or district consensus, educators agree to teach these particular standards for depth of student understanding. Curriculum is developed toward that end in each grade level and content area. Meaningful classroom, school, and district assessments are aligned to the Power Standards." Ainsworth, L. (2003). *Power Standards: Identifying the Standards That Matter the Most.* Englewood, CO: Lead + Learn Press. (p. 2)

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