Dan Monahan

Teacher Leadership Initiative

Capstone Project

Rethinking Professional Development in Cambridge, MA

**Leadership Profile and Context:**

I am currently a JK-8 Science Instructional Coach in Cambridge, MA. I work in 5 JK-5 schools, 1 Spanish Bilingual JK-8 school and 2 Middle schools. I work with over 100 teachers in those schools, so my time is spread thinly. I support teachers who are looking for support, new teachers, and Middle School teachers (because they are science specialists.) In addition, I run professional development as needed in individual schools as well as district wide. I also lead groups of teachers developing district curriculum and do additional curriculum development as needed.

My experiences as a leader have been focused at the school and district level, but have covered a range of topics, starting from when I first started in Cambridge. I was hired as the math and science teacher at the Cambridgeport School that had started several years before with a cohort of kindergarten students. The school had grown with the students, and I was hired when they first had a 7th grade. My humanities partner and I were responsible for creating the entire program from scratch. Fortunately we had some curriculum support from the district, but the rest of the program was up to us. This experience put me immediately in a leadership role and has shaped my perspective on what it means to be a teacher – a teacher is also a leader.

A colleague of mine during my first few years in Cambridge was very involved in the union, and she convinced me to become a building representative. I was very impressed with some of the newer leadership in Cambridge and the leadership also encouraged me to become more involved. I did the Emerging Leaders program at the MTA Annual Conference, and moved up the leadership to secretary and then vice president. I got involved in bargaining, and am currently the bargaining co chair. I am also as the evaluations specialist for the local union that involves educating our members about the new evaluation system and monitoring the implementation.

I chose to apply for the Teacher Leadership Initiative because I have had some training in association and instructional leadership, I have not had as much training in policy leadership. Through my work with the union, I have had some district leadership roles one of which led to my capstone project. Initially I had two possibilities to focus on during TLI. One was though my role as evaluation specialist for our local union. This work involved educating members about our new evaluation system, gathering feedback from educators and administrators about the implementation of the current system and making recommendations for improvements to the system. The hope was to do this work collaboratively with the district, but we had not had much success in making this a true labor/management collaboration. I knew that this would be particularly challenging to be successful, but I am still doing that work. I chose a different project for my actual capstone that had more promise for shorter term success during which I could build my policy leadership skills.

Through my role in the union, in the Spring of 2013 I was on a committee to review district data on the teacher survey (TELL Mass) and make recommendations to the district. One of the two issues identified by teachers was professional development – quality, cohesiveness and relevance. Being a leader of this work as well as the local union vice president at the time, I helped present the findings and to the superintendent and his leadership team in the summer of 2013. At that meeting, some members of the leadership team felt that professional development was so disorganized that it would not even be possible to compile a list of professional development in the district.

During that meeting decided to create a labor/management professional development committee. In December of 2013, I was appointed to that committee and chaired the subcommittee in charge of creating a 5-Year Plan. Thus began my capstone project.

**Description of pathway and competencies:**

My capstone project involved all three pathways: **instructional**, **policy** and **association**. This is within the **instructional** **leadership** path because professional development is about instructional improvement; however, it took on another level because we were also looking at the qualities of highly effective professional development, which includes consideration of instruction of educators. The project was also within the **association** **leadership** path because there were contractual issues to negotiate as well as bylaws changes that needed to be made. My focus for this project is on the **policy** **leadership** path because these competencies were most relevant and required me to stretch the most.

Below are the descriptions of the transforming stage of the four competencies I have selected for focusing on in this project. There are two overarching competencies and two policy leadership competencies.

1. Communication – Influences other teacher leaders and builds their capacity to communicate and advocate effectively with stakeholders at all levels. Successfully navigates communication within diverse and sometimes adversarial power structures.
2. Group Processes – Creates new groups and leads existing groups, offering solutions to challenges and actively engaging diverse opinions and experiences in producing solutions and desired outcomes.
3. Policy Implementation - Leads the development of effective and innovative plans to move ideas into action at many levels, as a result of inquiry and research. Innovates strategies for implementing poor policy while maximizing the benefit of sound policy.
4. Policy Advocacy - Inspires others to act through convincing, stakeholder-specific messaging. Creates and strengthens alignments with various stakeholders. Inspires action of others to advocate for the profession.

As I tell the story of my work, I will include connections to the pathways and competencies, showing how I exhibited aspects of the transforming stage in each of these four teacher leadership competencies. It will also not be in entirely chronological order as the work included two strands, Long and Short Term. Also, as I describe this work, I will often use the term “we,” because it was truly collaborative work, but keep in mind that I was the chair of the 5-Year Plan Subcommittee, and this project is about documenting my growth as a leader. The work was done by the group through my facilitation and guidance.

The charge of the Professional development Committee was to improve professional development in the Cambridge Public Schools. We broke into three subcommittees: New Teacher Induction, Educational Excellence Institute event and 5-Year Plan. The 5 Year Plan subcommittee (of which I was the chair) had 4 educators and 3 administrators.

The Cast:

Jessica: Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction and co-Chair of the Professional Development Committee

Chris: CEA President and co Chair of the Professional Development Committee

Katie: Principal and 5-Year Plan Subcommittee member

Paula: Academic Challenge and Enrichment Support Program Manager and 5-Year Plan Subcommittee member

Lisa: Science Coordinator and 5-Year Plan Subcommittee member

Susie: High School History teacher and 5-Year Plan Subcommittee member

Kate: ASD Inclusion Specialist and 5-Year Plan Subcommittee member

Christina: High School Extension teacher and 5-Year Plan Subcommittee member

Dan (me): JK-8 Science Instructional Coach and 5-Year Plan Subcommittee chair

Our initial target was to create a 5-Year Plan, however, it soon became apparent that this was beyond the scope of what we could accomplish. We revisited our plan, and broke it up into short and long term strands. The short-term strand was to develop a new framework for scheduling, documenting and providing professional development. The long term strand was to develop a vision for professional development in Cambridge as well as a set of criteria for evaluating the quality of professional development. Throughout this work, we continued to get feedback from the larger Professional Development Committee.

Long Term Strand: Developing a Common Vision

We understood that in order to make significant change, we had to have a common vision of high quality professional development across the district. This requires the creation of a vision statement in which all stakeholders have had an opportunity to have their voice heard about that statement. We started with our 6-person, 5-Year Plan subcommittee that I was chairing. One of our members (Christina) was particularly interested in this topic, so she researched professional development plans from similar, nearby districts. We reviewed their vision statements, and chose one that seemed to fit best for us. Then we made it our own through some collective editing and word-smithing.

Next we brought our vision to the entire professional development committee. They read the vision statement and reacted to it. We collected their feedback and revised our vision based on it. We then brought the vision to the cabinet (Superintendent and his leadership team.) We did a similar process with them and again made modifications to the vision statement.

We were also able to have some time at an administrators meeting, which included all principals and curriculum coordinators in the district. Because this was a much larger group and we had very limited time, we used a different strategy. For the first ten minutes of the meeting, we had the following projected (See the *April 2014 Admin Presentation* Powerpoint):

*Welcome Admin Team!*

*Posted around the room are copies of a proposed vision statement for professional learning. Please contribute to the nearby posters with:*

*• Warm Feedback (What works for you)*

*• Cool Feedback (What does not work or is missing)*

*• Questions you have (What you want to know more about)*

*• Interpretations (What this means to you)*

This got the administrators engaged and many of them talking with each other. We also had tome for some questions at the end of the session and collected additional notecards from them. We collected all of this feedback and used it to make another revision of the vision statement.

In this strand I showed strength in the **Group Processes** competency because we were “actively engaging diverse opinions and experiences.” I also showed strength in the **Policy Advocacy** competency because I “created and strengthened alignments with various stakeholders.”

Short Term Strand Phase 1: Garnering Stakeholder Support

This strand required more competencies to be successful because it involved actual change. Through this section, you will see how I showed strength in the **Communication**, **Policy Implementation** and **Policy Advocacy** competencies.

Our goal was to develop a new framework for scheduling, documenting and providing professional development. We set this goal because professional development was chaotic – each school and department came up with their own professional development plan, and then they scheduled it and implemented it. There were many scheduling conflicts, and because schools had “staff meetings” on different days, the number of available days was limited. We set about to coordinate school and district meeting days to minimize conflicts and to include some component of educator choice within the required professional development time. We also knew that if we were able to coordinate this time, we could also facilitate meetings between schools or departments that could not coordinate their time in the old framework.

In our contract, we have “a pool of thirty-five (35) hours per year for school curricular/staff development, scheduled tutoring services or parent/guardian conference services.” This is how school-based staff meetings as well as district department meetings happened in the past. Across the district, these happened on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays. K-5 schools had all 35 hours available to them, except specialists (PE, Art, Music, etc.) had department meetings that came out of this time. Middle schools had 20 hours at their school and departments (ELA, Math, Science, etc) had 15 hours. The high school had all 35 hours, but department meetings happened haphazardly within that time.

This was a chaotic, complex system, with many interlocking pieces. In order to make change, we needed to engage a wide range of administrators across the district. (NOTE: this work was happening in parallel with the long-term strand, so when we met with a group we would consider both short and long term strands)

We knew that we had to start with the Cabinet (Superintendent and his leadership team.) They knew about this work because they had set up our committee, so we were able to get 20 minutes at one of their meetings, however, we also knew that this group would likely be critical of change. We were aware of a certain amount of dysfunction within this group, so we had to be very convincing and clear. We also wanted to make sure that the message was delivered from a variety of voices to add to its merit and to eliminate the possibility of the proposal being dismissed based on the historical relationships between any one individual and members of the cabinet. Using a Google Docs, we collaboratively developed a presentation in which each member of our team had a few minutes to speak. Visually we included both the CPS (District) and CEA (Union) logos because we had union members and non-union administrators speaking. This also indicated the broad range of support for the ideas. See *April 2014 Cabinet Presentation.* (In the notes you can see who was speaking and for how long.)

At the presentation on April 7 to the Cabinet, we secured the approval to move ahead with the concept. We also we granted 30 minutes at and administrators meeting scheduled for April 11. We made some modifications to the presentation based on the audience. The Admin meeting had both principals and coordinators present, so we made sure that the voices of their representatives were clear. We recognized the admin representatives on the Professional Development Committee, and planned the presentation so that the admin representatives on our Subcommittee played significant roles (Katie is a Principal and Lisa is a Coordinator.) They each spoke about the strengths of the framework. Katie felt that it was critical for principals to understand how this was about systems thinking – a change from how we have often operated. She also though that they would appreciate how it could help them get their jobs done by easing scheduling and better supporting individual educators’ goals. At the end of the meeting, we had time for questions and also had an Exit Ticket:

• What excites you about what you learned today?

• What concerns you about what you learned today?

• What else do you want to ask us or say to us?

We collected their responses on notecards.

In this phase of the short term strand, I showed strength in the **Communication** andcompetency because I “Influenced other teacher leaders and built their capacity to communicate and advocate effectively with stakeholders at all levels, successfully navigated communication within diverse and sometimes adversarial power structures” I showed strength in the **Policy Advocacy** competency because I “inspired others to act through convincing, stakeholder-specific messaging and inspired action of others to advocate for the profession.”

Short Term Strand Phase 2: Designing and Approving the Framework

After the meeting, we organized and reviewed the feedback from administrators. (*April 2015 Admin General Feedback.)* There was a good deal of support for the ideas, but now had a good deal of work to do. Some specific concerns about scheduling arose and not all administrators had been present at the meeting. I personally met with the administrators who were not present, and I put together details of a framework that addressed the significant concerns.

There were three main concerns: The scheduling framework, the days of the week for school based and department meetings, and the CEA Executive Board meetings. The CEA Bylaws said that the Executive Board had to meet the first Monday of each month. We had recently been through a situation where the district had allowed schools to schedule school-based meetings that conflicted with the Executive Board meetings. This meant that the union representatives could not attend their school-based meetings. The schools changed their meeting times based on the CEA Bylaws.

The initial idea of the scheduling was to have courses meet on a particular day and week of the month, such as the first Monday or the second and fourth Thursdays. A quick analysis of the schedule showed that this was not equitable – for example, one month had only two available Mondays, while another had five.

The day of the week had a few complexities. We have two schools that have extended learning time, but not all of their staff work extended hours. They release their students early on Wednesdays to allow time for all staff (extended hours and not) to meet directly afterschool. Changing their day from Wednesday would involve changing the transportation schedule, as well as coordinating with many after school programs across the city. In addition, our middle schools have afterschool programs, often run by teachers, on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. This is a new program that was designed to have a cohesive after school program and there was significant concern about disrupting this for programmatic and transportation reasons.

There was not clear solution that met all of these needs. We also knew we had to respond to the concerns and gain cabinet approval to the final plan before moving forward. We were able to secure 20 minutes at a Cabinet meeting to get this approval on May 5 and decided to bring forward three options from which they could select. (*May 2014 Cabinet Presentation*) The presentation laid out the three options as well as the advantages and disadvantages to each. Fortunately, one of the options (C) was clearly superior, although it was not perfect. At this meeting, we were able to secure their approval to proceed with option C.

We then presented Option C to administrators, and a summary is presented here. Details are in *SchedulingInfoforCoordinatorsandPrincipals* and an overview is described here. See *May 2014 Admin Presentation* pages 5-9 to see some overview graphics.

Option C required the CEA (union) to change its bylaws. We had an upcoming annual membership meeting at which we could change the bylaws, so I submitted a proposal to the Bylaws Committee. I met with the committee and was able to secure their support. In addition, I gathered support amongst the membership. The bylaws change passed unanimously on June 2.

Rather than have the courses meet on second Tuesdays, for example, it was possible to have the days of the week rotate every four weeks as A, B, C and D. This came out evenly over the course of the year, taking into account the contractual limitations of certain weeks, such as Thanksgiving week. In other words, there were either 7 or 8 of each type (for example there were 7 - D Mondays and 8 - A Tuesdays.)

The day of the week solution was not perfect. The extended learning time schools stayed on Wednesdays, and all other schools moved to Mondays. Because the did not need to use all Wednesdays, extended learning time teachers could still participate in some other professional development without having to leave the school day early. This was an improvement over the existing situation.

One of the most significant improvements in the system for educators was that they could choose how to use 10 hours of their 35 contractually required hours. Principals and coordinators were concerned that they would be losing time with their educators, and they wanted to ensure that the choice would support the goals of their school. In response, the framework allows the principals to limit the choices so that each educator would have at least 4 options from which to choose.

In this phase of the short term strand, I showed strength in **Group Processes, Policy Implementation** and **Policy Advocacy** competencies. Because I was successful in changing the local union bylaws, it also showed my strengths in the **Association** pathway. I showed strength in the **Group Processes** competency because I “lead existing groups, offering solutions to challenges and actively engaging diverse opinions and experiences in producing solutions and desired outcomes.” I showed strength in the **Policy Implementation** competency because I ”lead the development of effective and innovative plans to move ideas into action at many levels.” I showed strength in the **Policy Advocacy** competency because I “inspired others to act through convincing, stakeholder-specific messaging.” I also “created and strengthened alignments with various stakeholders.”

Short Term Strand Phase 3: Implementing the Framework

The last phase of this strand was to make it actually happen. This work involved creating a system for submitting proposals, working with administrators to ensure the proposals were aligned with the scheduling framework, creating a catalog of courses, and putting a system in place for enrolling educators. While this was a tremendous amount of work, it did not demonstrate strengths in the teacher leadership competencies.

Fortunately, this final phase was achievable within the resources available to Jessica, the co Chair of the Professional Development Committee. We had recently designed a system to sign educators up for the Educational Excellence Institute and were able to use a similar online form. I worked closely with the district’s Web and Online Services Manager to design the form and approval process. (NOTE: The approval process was only to ensure that the course met the scheduling framework.) As the submission process occurred, I reviewed each course and communicated with the submitter to correct any issues.

At the same time, we started to develop the brochure for teachers. Again, I worked closely with our Web and Online Services Manager to design an online, searchable course catalog as well as a paper catalog. As the courses were being submitted, we send drafts of the catalog to the administrators to make sure courses were documented accurately.

Finally, the district already had an electronic registrar for professional development. We hired a clerk to enter all of the courses into the registrar. We also had some short training videos created to show both administrators and educators how to sign up for courses. We also made sure that all educators had accounts in the registrar. When teachers arrived back at school in August, the system was ready to go. (For the most part.)

Next Steps:

In August, the district hired a Program Manager for Educator Development. She has been a tremendous support in moving the work forward both in terms of logistics and planning. The labor/management professional development committee is still in place, but momentum seems to have waned. We need to reinvigorate it to continue to move this work forward.

The framework is in place and seems to be working fairly well. There were plenty of first-time glitches in the system that have been worked out by the Program Manager for Educator Development. We have recently sent out a survey to learn more about it from a wide range of stakeholders. We are considering a new system for course registration. Because we have one year under our belt, we should be in much better shape to implement this framework next year.

There are three specific next steps for the long term strand strand, which have not yet taken place. With regards to the vision, we need to engage teachers in the conversation and continue to keep that vision at the forefront of our work. We have only started to build on the vision by developing a set of criteria for high quality professional development that is in alignment with the vision. Finally, we need to engage many stakeholders in determining the content of the professional development. This will involve aligning school and district improvement plans and goals. This is the heart of the work, and I hope to continue use my leadership training to make it happen.

**Further Reflections:**

I found TLI most helpful in supporting my growth as a communicator and advocate. Specifically, I recall making an Audience Chart in Module 3 that was particularly helpful to think about the various perspectives of all of the stakeholders. I also think of the Story Telling workshop I did at the NEA Eastern Leadership Conference where I learned about the power of telling a story. I used that skill many times in the course of this work to convince others of the need for change, and I found it helpful in telling the story of this project.

A critical factor in my deciding to choose this particular project for my capstone was the support of administration. I had two options: professional development and the educator evaluation system. Because I felt the possibility for collaboration with the administrator in charge of the educator evaluation system was limited, I did not choose that project. I need to thank Jessica, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction and co-Chair of the Professional Development Committee for her support through this project. Without her support, this work would not have happened.

In my TLI application, I wrote about the need for administrators to see the power in promoting teacher leadership.

The problem comes in shifting the mindset of school leaders to take advantage of these ideas, particularly in its “chicken and egg” paradoxical quality. Until someone experiences a successful school change through enhanced teacher-leadership roles, they are not likely to enhance teacher-leadership roles to promote change. The reason why I am applying to the Teacher Leadership Initiative is because I have not found an answer to this question, and I believe that finding answers to this question is critical to the well-being of our profession.

I hope that my experiences with this capstone project can be an exemplar to highlight the potential for teacher leaders both in my district and beyond. This is not to say that educators cannot take on leadership without administrative support, rather that the leadership is much more effective with that support. The amount of change we were able to achieve in just a few months is remarkable and could not have happened without that support.

I very much appreciate how the stages of the competencies were described in the *Teacher Leadership Competencies* document:

There is no such thing as ‘backward’ in this document; there is only learning and action that will take you to new places in your development as a teacher leader. A teacher leader at the performing stage may find himself or herself suddenly emerging as his or her context changes, and this is an exciting development, rather than a step in the wrong direction. If you see these competencies and your development as fluid, you will develop more fully than if you attempt simply to march forward.

In my context with this project, I was able to show strength in each of the 4 competencies at the transforming level. In a different context, this would not have been possible. However, given my experience in this context, have been able grow my own abilities as a teacher leader and taste what is possible.

Appendices  
April 2014 Admin General Feedback.pptx

April 2014 Admin Presentation.pptx

April 2014 Cabinet Presentation.pptx

May 2014 Admin Presentation.pptx

May 2014 Cabinet Presentation.pptx

Proposed CPS PD Vision.docx

SchedulingInfoForCoordinatorsAndPrincipals.pdf