



District  
Management  
Group

## CASE STUDY

# Teamwork Transforms the School District of Lancaster (PA)

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*Distributed leadership, collaboration, the utilization of data, and joint fact-finding are the keys to developing and implementing major change.*

# Teamwork Transforms the School District of Lancaster

A multiyear budget crisis hardly seems like an opportune time to launch a comprehensive student improvement effort, but for the leaders of the School District of Lancaster (PA) it seemed to be exactly the right time. Amid drastic state budget cuts, they confronted the daunting task of doing more with less. Concentrating the district's funds and leadership energy became the strategic priority.

**T**hrough an inclusive strategic planning effort, Superintendent Pedro Rivera refocused dozens of existing initiatives around four powerful and interconnected themes, and then motivated an entire district to get involved in implementing the plan. Shunning the conventional top-down implementation model, he distributed leadership across a wide group of teachers, building administrators, and central office staff. His approach ensured broad-based support and lightning-fast implementation of sweeping efforts with little pushback.

## Background

The state of Pennsylvania cut \$860 million from the education budget in 2011-2012, and Governor Tom Corbett's 2012-2013 budget proposed another \$100 million for the chopping block. With the latest round of cuts, Pennsylvania's school districts will have lost \$1.5 billion since 2008, funds previously received from the state or from federal stimulus—a 15% drop over four years. The School District of Lancaster lost \$10 million in 2011-2012, and was forecasting another \$6 to \$8 million reduction. To balance the budget, the district would have to resort to increases

## FAST FACTS: School District of Lancaster (PA)



<b>1,645</b> staff members	<b>20</b> schools >>	<b>13</b> elementary	<b>4</b> middle schools	<b>1</b> high school	<b>2</b> alternative schools
<b>\$160</b> million operating budget (2011-12)	<b>11,000</b> students >>	<b>58%</b> Hispanic	<b>19%</b> African American	<b>17%</b> Caucasian	<i>Urban district within the largely bucolic Lancaster County, which is 97% white.</i>

in class sizes; the loss of instructional coaches in math and literacy at the high schools and elementary schools; reductions in tutoring services, ESL facilitators, library services, and summer school and other extended-time learning; plus cuts to many other important programs.

The superintendent feared that these cuts would undermine the impressive gains the district had been making in raising student achievement. Between 2003 and 2011, the percentage of 11th graders in Lancaster scoring proficient or above in math increased 73%, (going from 19% to 33%) and increased 52% in reading, (going from 29% to 44%). The percentage of students scoring below basic decreased 24% in math (from 62% to 47%) and 30% in reading (from 53% to 37%).

Superintendent Rivera was determined to change the discussion. Rather than focus on what was out of his control, he shifted the district's attention to the real question at hand—what could they continue to improve with the funds they did have?

The process started with codifying their theory of action and creating a focused strategic plan that embraced cost-effectiveness and the shifting of existing funds. The plan harnessed the district's energy, which had been dispersed among hundreds of individual attempts and mini-programs, and instead focused it on four simple but effective initiatives: creating a district-wide best-practices approach to elementary reading, addressing the challenges of struggling readers at the secondary level, aggressively rethinking drop-out prevention, and building the capacity of district leaders. But how Superintendent Rivera developed the details of each program and implemented all four programs in just one year was just as forward-thinking as the contents of the plan itself.

## Gains in student achievement (2003–2011 for 11th graders)

↑ **73%**

Increase in percentage of students scoring at grade level or above in math

↑ **52%**

Increase in percentage of students scoring at grade level or above in reading

↓ **24%**

Decrease in percentage of students scoring below basic in math

↓ **30%**

Decrease in percentage of students scoring below basic in reading

## Distributed leadership and joint fact-finding made all the difference

In only one year, the district was able to get an enormous amount of work done, accomplishing much more than similar transformations elsewhere that had taken three or four years to achieve. How? In addition to laser focus on goals, leadership responsibility was truly distributed. An entire district transformation was not dependent on one or two administrators; instead, a multi-disciplinary leadership team was created with over 40 members, split into working groups of seven to ten people for each of the four initiatives.

The obvious benefit of a distributed approach was that lots of work was shared by many more people than might be customary. And, because such a large number of people was involved, discussion of the plan quickly extended from the working groups to many of the other administrators, principals, and teachers as participants talked to friends and colleagues about what they were working on. That built even more momentum and later facilitated getting support from teachers, parents, and other stakeholders. Distributed leader-

ship was key to implementing all the work that needed to be done in a short time, and getting it done well.

In addition to building a broad-based team, Superintendent Rivera took a personal role in ensuring that the work moved forward. While he could not sit in on all of the working group meetings, his presence was certainly felt at each one; anytime there was a roadblock, he stepped in personally to help remove it. When important elements began to get watered down by the committees, perhaps out of fear that bold changes might generate pushback, →

the superintendent stepped in to urge the committee to do what was best for students. Another tactic Superintendent Rivera employed to ensure buy-in and faithful implementation was to utilize his regularly scheduled cabinet meetings and meetings with the district's principals to follow up on strategic efforts.

## The budget crisis was a given, but never an excuse.

Superintendent Rivera made implementing the strategic plan a constant, teamwork-based endeavor, involving as many leaders as he could, distributing responsibility to all of them, and being personally involved, as often as needed, all year long. The result was that the full weight of his office and the strength of his personal commitment to successfully implementing the plan inspired everyone involved to work together and to work even harder.

### **I** Nothing matters more than elementary reading

The first of the four strategic initiatives focused on elementary reading, with the goal of implementing a comprehensive approach to improving literacy. All educators are in agreement about the importance of reading and how fundamental it is to begin teaching reading skills from the moment students enter school. But every school in Lancaster had its own approach, and almost every teacher taught reading differently. At the district level, literacy would be hard to improve if everyone was doing something different. Hence, the goal was to create a common district-wide approach to literacy—a powerful idea if everyone could get on the same page.

In an effort to make sure the common approach would be accepted by teachers and staff and

would actually be usable in the classroom, Superintendent Rivera and the Elementary Reading working group began with joint fact-finding to help everyone fully understand the current situation. They cataloged the many different approaches being used and did so in a way that became a learning tool for everyone who participated. In addition to the detailed survey of elementary teachers, the district worked very closely with the three elementary school principals to understand what was really happening at the building level and what help and resources were needed to make the unified approach work as effectively as possible.

This approach differed from the typical method of central office leaders coming up with the plan and mandating that it be implemented. By researching teaching programs as a team, many in the district learned how varied and at times scattered the district's approach to reading had been. Few would have understood the need for a common program if the principals and staff hadn't learned firsthand about the current situation. Additionally, very practical ideas came to the fore, which all worked to ease the ultimate implementation. Many members of the working group and many of the teachers consulted were extraordinarily knowledgeable about what makes a great reading program; developing the plan together, they included these ideas in the final program.

The working group developed 10 non-negotiables for the Elementary Reading program (Exhibit 1). These were based on best practices—what was already working in the most effective classrooms or schools—and were refined in partnership with all the elementary school principals through multiple meetings and feedback rounds. The 10 items were built around a commitment to shift resources as needed, especially time during the school day, central office support, and professional development.

Next, a very detailed plan of how this new strategy would be rolled out was devised, again drafted with principal involvement. Principal involvement was key, as participants felt they had helped come up with the plan and were thus more willing to support it and able to cultivate buy-in from their colleagues within each building. →

## EXHIBIT 1 Elementary Literacy's 10 Non-Negotiables

In order to raise proficiency, the district's Elementary Literacy working group developed a list of recommendations to guide future work. The committee's vision was to implement the following non-negotiables—tools, training, and values—over the next three years. In practice, all were implemented in their very first year.



### Tools

- 1 Common materials and resources**  
Common materials and resources promote high standards for all students, promote collaboration among teachers, and increase the ability of building leaders and the district to monitor and support high-quality instruction.
- 2 Common formative assessments**  
Common formative assessments with explicit benchmarks and common ways to look at data ensure that all students are held to high standards. They reduce inconsistency across buildings, allow for easier transfer of data for highly mobile students, and can build momentum to move the entire district forward, not just individual schools.
- 3 A map of the 90-minute block**  
Having a common, communicated understanding of what makes a good 90-minute block provides additional support to teachers and will emphasize the district's focus on its approach to reading beyond just materials.
- 4 Observational look-fors**  
Providing a list to teachers, principals, and coaches that details what principals and coaches will be looking for when observing literacy instruction helps to make clear what is most important and builds a foundation for feedback conversations.



### Training

- 5 Sustained, embedded, on-going professional development**  
Professional development should occur in many formats—coaching, videos, meetings, peer observations, webinars—and not just “sit and get.” Fifty hours of sustained, embedded professional development on a narrowly focused topic provides appropriate time to learn new skills and to receive and incorporate feedback.
- 6 Support for principals and accountability for implementation without judgment**  
Principals and coordinators need to feel supported in their own learning and professional growth. An atmosphere without judgment will allow for open dialogue about strengths, weaknesses, and realities.



### Values

- 7 Broad understanding and support for “how we teach reading”**  
Teaching reading really is rocket science. By focusing on “how we teach reading,” we are providing best practices in literacy instruction that can be applied to any core program or content area. The materials become less of the focus; teaching our children to read is the goal.
- 8 An appropriately supported and supplemented core**  
A strong core program that meets the needs of 80 to 85% of students, appropriate materials, and guidelines for the 90-minute block that use the best practices in literacy instruction ensure that the needs of students are being met.
- 9 Incorporating all strands of literacy**  
Literacy instruction encompasses more than reading skills. All strands of literacy (reading, writing, speaking, listening, and possibly handwriting/keyboarding) should be addressed in the literacy curriculum for students to have a deep, rich base of skills by which they can analyze, experience, and understand the world around them.
- 10 Integration of literacy**  
Teaching content-area reading and writing skills, especially in social studies and science, as well as maximizing the use of instructional time we have with students allow for cross-curricular teaching and align with common-core state standards.

Source: School District of Lancaster

The district was able to implement all 10 of their “non-negotiables” in the first year, a task that would have taken many districts two to three years of development and implementation. The working group’s assessment of current practice and needs took three months, developing the “non-negotiables” took another three months, and crafting the implementation plan occupied the final three months. This was fast, but not rushed. Committee members met three to four times a month, and full-day principal and cabinet meetings were devoted to the four strategic initiatives each month. By treating these initiatives as the most important work, the district ensured that they became everyone’s highest priority.

## 2 Taking bold action regarding secondary reading

The second element in the four-part plan was to improve secondary reading. The data showed that 48% of students in middle and high school were not proficient readers, especially in comprehension skills, which is a common situation in urban districts. Equally common was the fact that Lancaster’s secondary schools did not teach reading. Although English and social studies classes involved reading, teachers of those classes did not teach reading. So the district made an incredibly bold decision: if our secondary students can’t read, we need to teach them reading.

The first real obstacle the working group faced was the already tight daily schedule; there was no period available to teach a reading course, which

meant the entire school schedule would need to be revised. Equally daunting was that there were no secondary reading teachers in the schools, nor was there money for adding them.

As in the elementary reading initiative, a principal-led working group first researched best practices to understand how middle and high school kids learn to read. The research revealed that significant time on task was required, between 45 to 90 minutes a day, five days a week—for half the students in the school. This demanded a major overhaul of the schedules.

Distributed leadership, joint fact-finding, and visionary leadership carried the day. The working group brought together the four middle schools to jointly revamp their schedules. There had never been any coordination between the schools, and everything was different: start and end times, number of days in a cycle, number of periods, and period lengths. In what was itself a heroic achievement, all four schools adopted the exact same schedule, and that schedule included a period every day to teach reading, five days a week, as a full course. They even created a common planning block at the same time at each school, just before lunch. This would allow staff from all four schools to meet together over lunch for 90 minutes when needed.

Many districts might have come to the conclusion that the schedule change was too complex, that much more study was needed, and that only a watered-down plan could be adopted. But, again, collaboration, teamwork, and strong leadership got them through this difficult situation. It turned

## Lancaster’s 4 Initiatives

1  
Creating a district-wide  
best practice approach  
to elementary reading

2  
Addressing  
reading at the  
secondary level

3  
Rethinking  
drop-out  
prevention

4  
Building  
leadership  
capacity

out that one of the four principals was a scheduling guru who offered to help the other three come to terms with how to work things out. A similar plan was instituted in the high schools. Those who still struggled with reading were enrolled in a 90-minute double-block of reading education a day, up from literally zero minutes one year before. The rationale behind this intensive strategy was that if a student still couldn't read well by high school, a quarter of the day would be time well spent working on that skill. The reading course was designed specifically for the 48% of the student body who struggled, allowing the stronger students to use the time for electives. In an effort to normalize the reading program for the enrolled students, the schedule was designed so that everyone in the school still received music, art, and physical education classes, plus the usual core courses.

With the schedule redesigned, the focus turned to staffing. Who would teach the new reading course? At first, timid suggestions emerged. "Let's have the English teachers run the classes." Or, "We will have extra special education staff, since many students will be in reading rather than the resource room, so let's have those staff members teach reading." Both were simple solutions, but not consistent with the district's theory of action, which called for highly skilled teachers. Many high school English and special education staff are not specifically trained to teach reading. The commitment was made to use only proven, well-trained reading teachers. New teachers would have to be hired. But how to pay for them?

Again, distributed leadership came to the rescue. The principals and special education director, who were leading the effort, offered to reduce their current staff in order to fund these critical positions. They weren't asked or forced, but they volunteered! If they hadn't been involved every week for ten months in the planning, it is unlikely that such a sacrifice would have been supported. A new job description was posted, a detailed interview process was created, and some very talented teachers were ultimately hired.

The leadership team also researched and identified programs and materials that could help teach secondary reading, as there was no

established curriculum to work from. They undertook a rigorous analysis of which students needed support by looking closely at test scores and other indicators, and used this information to design the best curriculum possible to achieve the goal of improving literacy.

The new reading plan was such a bold shift that the district decided to start with grades 6 and 9 and expand each year. All this occurred, of course, while the district was bracing for an \$8 million reduction for 2012-2103 in state and federal aid.

### 3 Drop-out prevention: A new look at an old problem

The third element of the district strategy was drop-out prevention. Across the School District of Lancaster, about 40% of high school students were dropping out. Obviously, keeping kids in school was a long-established district priority. Even though much thought and effort had already been put into countless approaches to drop-out prevention, the sad statistic meant that nothing was working well enough.

Rather than following the usual approach of outlining a plan to keep students in school, the working committee took a backwards design approach. They set out to find out, empirically, why Lancaster students actually drop out.

Everyone on the committee had a different theory of why students drop out, but no one definitively knew the real reasons, so it was very hard to know what to do to keep students in school. After a brainstorming session, over twenty likely causes were identified: inability to read, high mobility, pregnancy, suspension for poor behavior, bullying, difficult home life. The list went on. But which were the true causes?

The committee decided to conduct a detailed root-cause analysis. The working group for Drop-out Prevention first compiled a list of all the students who had dropped out over the previous →



Superintendent  
Pedro Rivera reads  
with students.

two years, then they compiled more and more information about those students: their attendance, where they lived, when they moved to Lancaster, how often they changed houses or neighborhood, which teachers taught them, what programs they were in, whether they received special education, whether they attended alternative high schools, whether they had siblings who graduated, their grades going back to fifth grade, suspension reports, teacher comments, and any other bits of information that confirmed or refuted a hypothesis.

The goal was to be very fact-based in their analysis, but the working group faced technical challenges. In some cases, computer systems had been updated and old data had been lost; in some schools, the data was intact, but was on countless pieces of paper. Many other districts might have given up on incorporating more information, and tried to make do with the little that was easily available. But because the superintendent had

With the data in hand, each member of the working group was then able to present a hypothesis of why students were dropping out, and then test the theory against the data set. It turned out that the conventional wisdom of the team had been off base.

What did they find? Students with special needs dropped out a higher rate—not true; students dropped out because of teen pregnancy—not true; those who moved into Lancaster later in their school careers dropped out—not true; students who had behavior problems dropped out—not true; and the list went on. The fact that so many of their theories were unfounded explained why the district’s programs weren’t making a big difference—the root cause hadn’t been correctly diagnosed, making it unlikely that their efforts could accurately address it.

The team ultimately found that there were two main reasons that students dropped out in Lancaster: (1) failure in the middle school without negative consequences, and (2) rough readjustment after returning to mainstream education from an alternative high school.

Identifying the first group was a major achievement, as was understanding their plight. In middle school, a student might start on the road of underachievement by failing math, then English. But as is the case in many middle schools, if a student attends school regularly and is well behaved, he or she is promoted at the end of the year. However, when the same student reaches high school and fails ninth-grade English and math, he’s told that he will not graduate unless he passes four years of English and math. Learning as a freshman that you’re so far behind that it will take five or six years to graduate, many students give up and drop out.

Fully understanding the problem, the working group sent high school staff to bring their explanation to the middle schools, where the problems first began. Lancaster began to face the drop-out challenge where it actually starts.

This past spring, for the first time in the district, eighth graders who failed too many courses were not promoted to ninth grade—a real consequence for their failure. To make up the credits, each of the students was enrolled in a new, intensive summer school developed as part of the Drop-out

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instilled a culture of not cutting any corners in implementing the new plan, team members sifted through paper records, photocopied attendance slips, interviewed teachers who had specific students, pulled paper copies of report cards, and printed out reports from four different sources to compile the most accurate picture possible of who these students really were. Once they had amassed all the data, the District Management Council helped them to create a structure to analyze the extensive primary source documentation.

Prevention plan and run by tough-love teachers who demanded high performance, complete attendance, and hard work. Nearly all the students who were eligible enrolled, and nearly all of them passed, eventually graduating into ninth grade. Introducing real consequences in the form of having to give up a summer reset the students' old patterns into new, more successful ones.

The second cohort of students who dropped out was made up of kids who had spent time at the alternative high schools. The purpose of the alternative high schools was to create a smaller, more structured environment where students wouldn't get lost in the crowd. The alternative schools were a weigh station to help students through problems or a crisis so they could get back to the regular high school. But, it turned out, once students returned to the mainstream environment, they decided to drop out.

For the second group, a new program was created within the high school that would serve those returning students in a unique way, creating a transitional space in a separate wing of the main campus, where teachers could work with these students more closely and ensure that their re-entry was supported and well supervised.

These were bold strategies that were very thoughtful and logical. The root causes behind the drop-out crisis were identified and the working group had the willingness to give up on long-held beliefs. They let data drive their analysis, and the group was able to create the targeted programs necessary to keep Lancaster's kids in school.

## 4 Building leadership capacity

The final element of the four-part plan was leadership development. The goal of this working group was to increase leadership capacity for assistant principals, principals, and central office staff. Given the district's use of collaborative leadership, it was critical to have talented leaders and a strong succession and development plan. The Leadership working group set out on a two-pronged approach to build more capacity: hiring candidates with more capacity and increasing the skill set of those already working in Lancaster.

The first step was to determine which skills, traits, and abilities mattered most in a leader.

After gathering much input, the leadership team came to the conclusion that some skills could be learned, but others could not. With this insight, they determined that interviewers need to look for evidence of innate skills every successful administrator must possess, such as empathy, a supportive approach, and comfort

**Superintendent Rivera made implementing the strategic plan a constant, teamwork-based endeavor, involving as many leaders as he could.**

with making hard decisions. These skills were in contrast to other more teachable skills like being comfortable looking at data or familiarity with certain curriculum.

The traditional hiring system, unfortunately, often overlooked candidates with innate abilities in favor of those with specific, relevant experience. Most of the highest-performing principals didn't have a lot of technical experience when hired, but because they were internal candidates, this was overlooked. Strangely enough, these very same high performers would not necessarily have been hired if they weren't already known to the district. Hiring criteria in Lancaster, and in most districts, don't include looking for these innate abilities.

The new interview questions targeted many of the innate skills and approaches, rather than work history. The new revamped plan also included a series of performance challenges that would allow the interviewer to judge key skills. When interviewing for a position as a principal, for example, the candidate would be asked to analyze a data set and write a one-page summary of conclusions, showing his or her thought process and writing →

ability. During a second interview, a candidate might be asked to write a letter to staff sharing good and bad news, so that the interview team could judge the capacity to be diplomatic, an innate ability often ignored in the interview process, but crucial just the same.

After countless years of using the traditional interview system, the district fully adopted the new approach, implementing it to evaluate every new administrative candidate only nine months after the leadership team first tackled reforming the hiring process.

**Superintendent Rivera intervened whenever roadblocks came up, clearing the way for work to continue.**

For existing staff, the working group designed a new approach to job-embedded training to foster more hands-on leadership development. For example, many assistant principals will become future principals, so one strategy was to give them a few specific roles or responsibilities similar to those of the principal, and evaluate them on those skills. The assistant principals could then be taught to overcome shortcomings.

For current principals, the working group determined that Superintendent Rivera should review their skills compared to the desired skills and create an individualized plan to work on one or two skills per year.

Overall, the working group recognized that every administrator can grow and improve. They believed Lancaster benefited from a strong administrative team, and their plan focused on how to make all administrators stronger at their jobs.

**Leadership, not money**

The successful implementation of the four projects was enabled both by the strong leadership of the superintendent, who empowered his teams to think big and who didn't allow cutting corners, and by distributing leadership and responsibility for designing and implementing the strategic initiatives. The budget crisis was a given, but never an excuse.

Superintendent Rivera demonstrated his leadership by making implementation of the four projects part of the day-to-day work in the district, bringing the topic into standing meetings, and making it not a second job or an afterthought, but a primary part of everyone's daily tasks. Work was done between the meetings so that meetings were not just a time to pick up where discussion had left off but rather to be used as meaningful working sessions. The results of those meetings were shared with principals and other administrators for their feedback in a continual process that assured full team buy-in of the goals.

Superintendent Rivera intervened whenever roadblocks came up, clearing the way for work to continue. Although he set a demanding pace, the pace was not too fast and the workload was never too heavy because tasks were distributed to principals and teachers.

Lancaster was able to implement the plan so well because the process was built around a two-way dialogue, rather than having the central office dictate change. Although the conventional wisdom is that a top-down approach to change is the quickest, the School District of Lancaster proved that distributed leadership, collaboration, the utilization of data, and joint fact-finding are the keys to developing and implementing major change and doing so in record time. ♦