



CASE STUDY

# Putting the Strategic Plan into Action at LAUSD: The Breakthrough Team Approach

*by John J-H Kim, Amram Migdal, and Dominique Aubry*

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*Unlocking the talents and energy  
of LAUSD's educators, administrators,  
and staff with the Breakthrough  
Team Approach.*

# Putting the Strategic Plan into Action at LAUSD

## *The Breakthrough Team Approach*

John J-H Kim, Amram Migdal, and Dominique Aubry

**A**t the close of the 2017-2018 school year, Michael Romero felt excited and hopeful as he reviewed the progress Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) was making toward its strategic goals. As senior executive director of strategy and innovation, Romero had worked with newly appointed Superintendent Michelle King to craft the new 2016–2019 strategic plan and has since been in charge of putting the plan’s ambitious goals into action. With 30 years in the district, Romero had seen many strategic plans come and go, but his excitement stemmed from the feeling that this time the district’s efforts seemed different—more focused on implementation and already with tangible results to show.

LAUSD is the second-largest school district in the United States, with over 700,000 students and a budget of over \$7 billion. The district has pockets of excellence, yet addressing persistent achievement gaps and raising achievement for all students has been a challenge due to the district’s immense size, high percentage of English Language Learners, and high poverty rate. LAUSD’s efforts have been further complicated by rapidly declining enrollment that has created financial pressures.

It was clear to all those involved in drafting the strategic plan that, for real change to happen at scale across the district, staff had to be mobilized to engage in the work. Therefore, the district’s theory of action emphasized



153rd Street Elementary school students

the importance of engaging teachers and staff in the effort to achieve the district’s goals. In 2017-2018, when it came time to implement the new strategic plan, Romero recommended that the district partner with District Management Group (DMGroup) to try an innovative method called the Breakthrough Team Approach (BTA), a powerful way of tapping into the problem-solving potential and peak-performance abilities of the district’s frontline people to achieve results toward district priorities, all while building the district’s leadership capacity.

### FAST FACTS



**LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT<sup>2</sup>**

Total Schools:  
**1,306**

**713,871** students

- **74%** Latino
- **9.8%** White
- **8.4%** African American
- **6.0%** Asian

- **588,696** K-12 Students
- **76,220** Early Education Students
- **18,681** Adult Education Students
- **30,274** Special Day Classes, Continuation, and Opportunity School Students

Note: Data as of SY2017-2018. Not all percentages add up to 100%.

Over the course of three intensive 10-week BTA cycles during the 2017-2018 school year, LAUSD launched 78 breakthrough teams across the district, each composed of five to seven teachers and staff. Each team took on a specific challenge to improve their school's performance in an area that directly aligned with a districtwide strategic priority. Teams collaborated to innovate and test ideas, attacking their specific challenges with urgency and focus. They continuously measured their results, pivoting when necessary to achieve their goals within the short 10-week period. Throughout the process, DMGroup consultants and performance coaches supported teams by helping them with just-in-time professional development and coaching.

As Romero reviewed the BTA results thus far, he felt proud that LAUSD's principals, teachers, and staff were driving progress toward achieving the goals of the strategic plan. While there was still a long way to go, the Breakthrough Team Approach had contributed to recent strides on the district's most important priorities. During the three breakthrough cycles in the 2017-2018 school year, approximately 75% of LAUSD breakthrough teams achieved their performance objectives, while expanding their skills and leadership capabilities to meet challenges moving forward. Romero believed that unlocking the knowledge, creativity, skills, and energy of the participating schools' principals, teachers, staff, and local district leaders with the Breakthrough Team Approach would unleash momentum across the district to make the strategic plan a reality.

## Los Angeles Unified School District

LAUSD is the nation's second-largest school district, with 1,300 schools, over 700,000 students speaking 94 languages, more than 60,000 personnel, and a budget of over \$7 billion. More than one in five of the diverse student population is an English Language Learner (ELL), and 84% of its students are eligible for Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL). The district spans 720 square miles across Los Angeles and 31 smaller municipalities and unincorporated areas. Given its immense size, the district is organized into six local geographic districts, each with its own local superintendent. In

**Approximately 75% of LAUSD breakthrough teams achieved their performance objectives, while expanding their skills and leadership capabilities to meet challenges moving forward.**

the face of severe fiscal pressures, LAUSD has been working continuously to raise student achievement and close stubbornly persistent achievement gaps, such as those between students of color and white students and between all LAUSD students and state and national averages. Among all LAUSD students, fourth and eighth graders scored lower in math and reading, on average, than their peers throughout the state of California and the United States, while LAUSD's black and Latino students consistently underperformed their white peers.<sup>1</sup> While the district had made progress, the achievement gaps had remained entrenched since at least 2003 despite national, statewide, and local efforts to allocate resources toward closing them. Complicating matters, student enrollment has shrunk by 200,000 since 1998. In 2012, nearly \$400 million in budget cuts forced LAUSD to dismiss thousands of employees, shorten the school year by 10 days, and scale back arts and adult education programs.

## A District on the Move: Strategic Planning at LAUSD

To inform a strategic plan that would achieve LAUSD's aim "to close persistent achievement gaps and create a better future for our students," Superintendent Michelle King began her tenure in 2016 by seeking input from stakeholders who represented the diversity of LAUSD's interests, including administrators, students, parents,

Total Employees:  
**60,240**

Total Operating Budget:  
**\$7.52b**

Per Pupil Cost:  
**\$10,000**

Graduation Rate:  
**76.1%**  
(CA statewide average 82.7%)

FRPL Population:  
**84%**

English Language Proficiency  
**157,619**  
Students learning to speak English proficiently

educators, community and labor partners, the school board, the business community, and civic leaders. King and her team then engaged DMGroup to help incorporate this feedback and work with the district to develop a powerful strategic plan. Central to DMGroup's approach to strategic planning is to distill a district's overarching mission into a tightly focused set of priorities with measurable goals. DMGroup believes great power lies in creating a short list of priorities to provide focus to the daily work of the district. Working through DMGroup's strategic planning process, LAUSD created its 2016–2019 strategic plan, "A District on the Move," which laid out five priorities:

### 1. Proficiency for All

Provide personalized educational experiences that ensure all students are exposed to high-quality instruction and prepared for success after graduation. LAUSD aimed to improve early literacy, increase the proportion of students meeting or exceeding ELA and math standards, and ensure the progress of ELL students.

### 2. 100% Attendance

Work with families to ensure that all students are able to be in school every day, and reduce the number of chronically absent students by 30% by the 2018-2019 school year.

### 3. School Safety

Enhance positive school climates, model and reinforce positive behavior, and build emotional safety, respect, and resiliency so students feel physically safe and emotionally secure and supported at school.

### 4. Parent, Community, and Student Engagement

Work with families and community partners to unlock students' full potential and create collaborative relationships to support students through graduation.

### 5. Build a Solid Foundation for Early Learners

Raise the quality of programs in social and emotional development, literacy and language, and math to prioritize the early cognitive development of all children in the district and set them up for success starting in kindergarten.

As part of the strategic planning process, much effort was put into articulating a cogent theory of action. Given the size of the district, LAUSD's theory of action reflected its fundamental belief that sustained systemic improvement



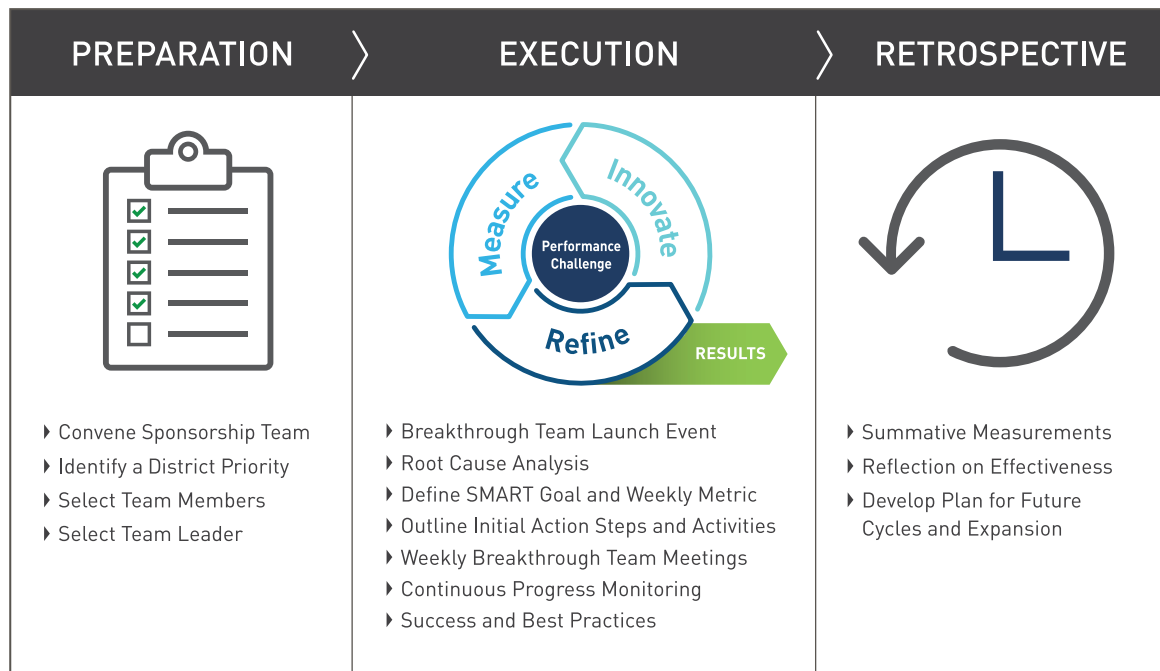
Michael Romero addressing the Breakthrough Teams

can happen only by engaging frontline educators and staff in pursuit of high-level priorities and directing "its efforts and resources to recruit, develop and support principals and teachers in creating a learning environment that ensures 100% of students achieve and graduate." Notably, the theory of action did not mention central office administrators and instead prioritized enabling educators to perform at their best.

Romero was charged with ensuring that the strategic plan was understood and implemented throughout the district. In keeping with the theory of action, he aimed to involve a large and multifaceted group from all levels of the district in a structured effort to turn the strategic plan from words on a page into concrete actions and results.

## Implementing the Strategic Plan: The Breakthrough Team Approach Shows the Way

As Romero was seeking an approach to bring LAUSD's strategic plan to life, DMGroup leaders told him about the Breakthrough Team Approach. This approach engages staff on the frontlines to work on a tangible goal related to a district priority. BTA participants work to achieve real results within a short period of time and, in the process, build leadership capacity. DMGroup described how this approach has been used successfully in complex urban districts, including Springfield Public Schools (MA) and Boston Public Schools (MA). These districts used the Breakthrough Team Approach to engage staff to make significant progress on priorities such as raising math proficiency levels, boosting early childhood literacy, improving school safety, increasing student attendance, and numerous other objectives. The Breakthrough Team Approach appealed to Romero precisely because it aligned with the district's theory of action to leverage the energy, talents, and insights of the principals, teachers, and staff



Source: District Management Group.

closest to the challenges to achieving the district’s goals.

In the Breakthrough Team Approach, small teams of five to seven members take on a performance challenge—a highly specific goal to achieve within a short time frame of approximately 10 weeks. Teams are composed to include a cross-section of staff whose work is closest to the problems that need to be solved, including educators as well as other staff well positioned to address the problem and identify solutions. Teams formulate innovative strategies and select appropriate metrics to track their progress. Progress is measured weekly to promote accountability and help discover which strategies and methods are working and which need to be adapted. They iterate and refine their approach in rapid cycles as they concentrate on achieving their performance objectives within the 10-week time frame. Each team is assigned a designated DMGroup performance coach to help them collaborate and experiment in a systematic fashion and work through obstacles. The Breakthrough Team Approach also incorporates in-the-moment professional development to build leadership capacity among team members while they work to achieve district goals, which is a more effective approach than teaching about leadership through instruction (*Exhibit 1*).

As opposed to one-off, top-down initiatives and programs, the Breakthrough Team Approach empowers staff to

achieve measurable progress on the district’s—and their own—most significant challenges. The philosophy underlying the Breakthrough Team Approach emphasizes that frontline educators and staff are in the best position to understand challenges and formulate solutions. Lasting change and bottom-up innovation depend on the energy and know-how of those closest to the problems.

## Putting the Breakthrough Team Approach into Action

### Sponsorship at the Top Is Critical to Success

The Breakthrough Team Approach takes approximately four months from start to finish, and the visible support and involvement of district leadership is a “must have” for an effective effort. At the outset, a district executive sponsor, along with a districtwide sponsorship team of three to five administrative and instructional leaders, takes charge of the overall effort. The superintendent can serve as the executive sponsor, but the role is often held by the head of an operational unit whose responsibilities relate directly to district objectives. The sponsorship team, working with the executive sponsor, identifies the priorities for breakthrough teams to focus on, selects participants, monitors progress, and provides support by helping teams access resources or navigate organizational complexities.



Breakthrough Team participants on launch day

In LAUSD's work, Mike Romero served as the executive sponsor, working with the superintendent, assistant superintendent, chief academic officer, and director of schools on the districtwide sponsorship team. Given the size of LAUSD, in addition to the districtwide sponsorship team, each local district formed its own sponsorship team to oversee the BTA process in their respective local districts. These local district sponsorship teams helped choose school sites and coordinate with principals at participating schools to select BTA team leaders and team members from the school. Principals played an important role, facilitating communication and providing encouragement and visible support for the BTA effort, giving staff the confidence to pursue innovative solutions, and encouraging accountability. In turn, each breakthrough team leader guided their team through the BTA process, communicating with their principal and the team's DMGroup performance coach, ensuring the effectiveness of team meetings, and driving team members to take the agreed action steps to test solutions and ensure they reached their goals.

## Careful Team Selection Generates Bottom-Up Solutions

Romero, along with the districtwide and local district sponsorship teams and DMGroup, began the BTA effort by meeting with leaders from each of LAUSD's six local districts to walk through the process, timeline, expectations, and goals and to communicate that the BTA effort was a district priority. When the sponsorship team sought schools to volunteer to participate, many of the lower-performing schools in the district welcomed the opportunity to try the novel method. Some schools ended up with multiple teams, each pursuing its own distinct performance challenge. Overall, 78 teams took part in the process across three breakthrough cycles, two in 2017 and another in 2018. Several first-cycle teams were so energized by the

results that they opted to participate in subsequent cycles, working on new or refined goals.

The districtwide and local sponsorship teams worked with individual school sites to determine the strategic priorities for teams to focus on, then carefully planned the composition of each team. Teams were diverse and included individuals from a variety of functions whose day-to-day work directly related to the assigned strategic priority. Mixed teams tend to experience better dynamics compared to more homogeneous or hierarchically structured teams. In DMGroup's experience, teams struggled if they were built solely based on a single role or type of role (e.g., composed entirely of math teachers) or based on hierarchy (e.g., only division heads or assistant principals); the multifaceted nature of the challenges benefit greatly from having multiple perspectives and inviting candid discussions. Breakthrough team leaders were carefully chosen for their knowledge of the challenge, the respect they would command among other participants, and their desire and potential to grow and develop leadership abilities during the process.

While a total of 78 teams were launched at LAUSD, we will focus on two teams to provide more detailed examples of how the Breakthrough Team Approach was used to realize strategic goals.

### 153rd Street Elementary School Attendance Breakthrough Team

*Local District South's 153rd Street Elementary School (ES) became the site of a breakthrough team focused on addressing chronic absenteeism and moving the district closer to achieving its strategic goal of 100% attendance (defined as 100% of students attending 96% or more of school days). The district's goals included reducing the number of chronically absent students<sup>3</sup> by 30%, from 11% of the student population in the 2016–2017 school year to 7.7% by 2018–2019. The 153rd Street ES breakthrough team included the principal, who served as team-lead, along with an assistant principal, teachers, and a resource specialist.*

### Columbus Middle School Math Breakthrough Team

*LAUSD Local District NW's Columbus Middle School (MS) was one of the sites the sponsorship team selected to focus on improving student math performance as part of the district's Proficiency for All goal. While Columbus MS administrators and math teachers had been working tirelessly to raise performance, proficiency at the large urban middle school hovered around 13% to 15%. The sponsorship team collaborated with Local District NW and Columbus MS leaders to select a team that included math instructors, an interventionist, and a counselor.*

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## **Launch Day: Setting the Tone and Starting the Work**

Each of LAUSD’s three breakthrough cycles kicked off the work with a day-long launch event with all of the teams gathered together in one room. On each of these launch days, the room buzzed with energy, and participants exhibited a mixture of excitement, skepticism, and uncertainty.

For most LAUSD participants, the launch day was the first exposure to the Breakthrough Team Approach. The day therefore began with DMGroup providing an introduction to the philosophical underpinnings of the Breakthrough Team Approach and a comprehensive review of the processes and expectations. Participants took part in team-building activities, including an interactive game providing a sense of what it feels like to rapidly iterate, test, learn, and grow toward high performance—an underlying theme throughout the breakthrough process. Then each team went off to meet with their DMGroup performance coach and spent much of the day formulating their goals. The launch events created excitement and communicated that the district was prioritizing this collective effort.

## **Formulating SMART Goals**

Individual breakthrough teams are tasked with formulating a specific, concrete, and achievable goal that aligns with their assigned strategic priorities. These SMART goals—goals that are Specific, Measurable, Aggressive yet Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound—directly touch on team members’ daily work, and are impactful enough to influence the district’s overall goals. Developing SMART goals is a crucial component of the Breakthrough Team Approach, and it can be a painstaking process. On launch day, DMGroup performance coaches work closely with the teams to create their SMART goals, and teams continue refining and solidifying goals, in collaboration with their DMGroup coaches, over the next week or so. They have the chance to adjust and refine their SMART goals at a check-in three weeks into the cycle.

SMART goals must be laser-focused, highlighting the

current state of performance and the desired outcome. SMART goals originate from within the teams, leveraging their knowledge and making the district’s high-level strategy manageable—and an urgent priority. “You’re specific, and you’re looking at one high-leverage thing that you can do well,” said a member of the districtwide sponsorship team. “And, by doing that, you ultimately see some immediate gains.” When properly formulated, SMART goals provide clear and measurable results to track, giving teams the specificity to begin developing targeted strategies. Specific metrics that accurately indicate progress toward the overall goal are tracked each week of the 10-week breakthrough cycle.

### **153rd Street ES Attendance Team SMART Goal**

*For its SMART goal, the 153rd Street ES attendance breakthrough team focused on kindergarten and targeted 42 individual students in their classes who were chronically absent. They discussed exactly how many students had to improve their attendance, and by how much, for the goal to be suitably aggressive yet still achievable. Their performance coach challenged them by asking: Does the goal feel exciting but still challenging and achievable? How would it influence your classroom? How would it influence the district’s strategic priority? After much debate and discussion, the 153rd Street ES team’s SMART goal read: “Average attendance for the 42 chronic absentee students in kindergarten (as of April 20, 2017) will improve from 84.7% to 86.7% by June 9, 2017.”*

### **Columbus MS Team SMART Goal**

*After crafting an initial draft of their SMART goal on launch day, the Columbus MS math breakthrough team worked over the next two weeks—with input and support from their performance coach, principal, and the district—to finalize a highly specific goal. After much data-driven discussion and several iterations, the team arrived at a highly specific goal: “Between March 5 and May 18, 2018, 17 of 23 students who scored ‘Near Standard’ on an initial assessment test will achieve ‘At or Above Standard’ on an assessment test at the end of the period.”<sup>4</sup>*

These goals were specific, targeting individual students in team members’ classes and describing the exact progress

needed for the goal to be achieved: improving the students' collective average attendance to 86.7%, or scoring "at or above standard" on the second assessment test. The teams also settled on weekly metrics—that 17 of the 23 students get 3 out of 5 questions correct on a weekly teacher-created assessment quiz, in the case of Columbus MS—to ensure they were making progress toward their SMART goals and that the goals were both aggressive and achievable. And, of course, the teams were time-bound to cause these improvements to occur by the end of the breakthrough cycle's 10-week time frame.



Team working with performance coach to develop SMART Goal

Whereas the overarching district goals to improve attendance or increase proficiency previously felt amorphous and difficult to achieve, the team found that formulating SMART goals gave them focus. By breaking the strategic aim into a tangible goal—improving attendance among 42 students in their own classrooms, or raising the scores of 17 of 23 students—the teams put names and faces to the goals and could focus on moving those specific students across the line. SMART goals therefore make broad, overarching objectives concrete, and teams gain confidence that the BTA methods of experimentation, careful measurement and analysis, and iteration will allow them to meet their goals.

### Breaking Through: Working to Achieve Results

Following the intellectually rigorous launch days, LAUSD teams outlined initial action steps and started to work. Often, during the first weeks of the performance challenge, teams expressed frustration as they adjusted to a mindset of rapid problem-solving in pursuit of near-term outcomes. One participant, frustrated and skeptical with this new way of working, claimed, "This doesn't work in

education. This will never work." DMGroup coaches encouraged the teams to persevere as they established norms and routines for working together, tracking data, and systematically trying different ideas and strategies.

In working to achieve results, myriad issues arose, including learning to function effectively as a team, analyzing root causes, and iterating to find solutions. To help the teams through the process, DMGroup experts and performance coaches provided explicit professional development on topics ranging from goal-setting to methods of identifying root causes (such as using fishbone diagrams), improving student outcomes by using data, problem solving and team building, time management and priority planning, and leadership and team accountability, among others. DMGroup's targeted professional development was delivered on a just-in-time basis, at the moment when new skills or methods were urgently needed to make progress on the performance challenge. These skills were then practiced and reinforced by the coaches as participants worked on their performance challenge, allowing participants to build skills and leadership capacity.

### 153rd Street ES Team Early Adjustments

*For the 153rd Street ES attendance breakthrough team, regular communication among team members turned out to be a procedural challenge in the first three weeks of the breakthrough cycle. Finding the opportunity to meet as a team on a weekly basis amid conflicting schedules, ad hoc tasks, and other unexpected interruptions was challenging for many teams. The 153rd Street ES team requested that DMGroup and their performance coach provide an explicit professional development session on exercising leadership skills and building team accountability systems. One immediate outcome that the coach observed from these sessions was a shift toward improved collaboration. Team members moved from limited communication within the team—often making contact just once per week—to communicating via texts, email, and additional meetings in order to increase the impact of collaboration in improving the results within their classrooms.*

### Rapid Iteration Toward Success

LAUSD breakthrough teams iterated and pivoted on their initial approaches as they adjusted to meet their goals within the short cycle time. Becoming comfortable with experimentation is a primary mode of leadership development in the BTA process, but it can be a challenging transition for many participants. Because the 10-week challenge creates urgency, participants inevitably increase



their bias to action—the habit of acting to test a hypothesis or new plan quickly, then evaluating and changing tactics without hesitation if necessary. Weekly meetings ensure team members feel accountable to one another and make progress. In this way, participants build a deeper understanding of their practice and craft, areas that hold them back, and areas where they have strengths to leverage and share. This newfound and enduring awareness is often a primary benefit of the Breakthrough Team Approach.

### 153rd Street ES Team Performance Challenge

Early on, the 153rd Street ES attendance team noted that preventative measures to stem absenteeism had a greater impact than reactive measures. One team member said, “Previously, we had not started the year with a target group, but intervened with individual students as their attendance fell below the proficient category.” By identifying a target group of chronically absent students to monitor, the team could try tailoring communications to parents of chronically absent students. The team educated many families about the importance of attendance, explaining, for example, the impact of attending a partial day of school when students had a doctor’s appointment. The team discovered that parents wanted more visibility into their children’s attendance behavior. “We were able to add a tool for parents, an app that facilitates sharing information between teachers and parents, where parents can access attendance and behavior data in real time from their phone,” said one team member. The app was available as a district resource, and the BTA performance challenge offered the opportunity for team members to familiarize themselves with the resource and put it to use.

To motivate students to improve attendance, the school formed “Club 96” to reward and celebrate students who attended at least 96% of school days. One teacher said, “I started to realize that this is effective when we started hearing from kids, ‘Oh, I want to be part of Club 96. I want to be part of this extra-curricular activity, but I have to have 96% or better.’ And the kids are talking about it; the kids are actually encouraging each other. That’s when I knew that this program had an impact on our school.” 153rd Street ES later received multiple awards for achieving the largest improvement in attendance within Local District South, bringing the school’s kindergarten chronic absenteeism rate below the districtwide average.

### Columbus MS Math Performance Challenge

Early in the cycle, the Columbus MS team decided to administer short quizzes to check students’ understanding of the content. This low-stakes approach allowed students to share what they learned and ask questions and teachers to adapt their approaches to increase student learning.

**"Taking a large abstract goal of raising math achievement and breaking it down into a more specific challenge enabled this team to focus on moving individual students to proficiency."**

However, crafting a thoughtful, effective quiz was not a simple matter. During the first three weeks, the team experimented with administering multiple quizzes. Soon, they determined that they could better analyze and measure skills gaps with a single, thoughtfully crafted weekly quiz. Next, the team had to agree on the number of questions, length of questions, overall length of the quiz, level of rigor, and whether to draft unique questions or pull questions from an existing tool. Through an iterative approach of testing, learning, and refining, the Columbus MS team decided to administer short, five-question quizzes each Friday to evaluate progress and check students’ understanding of the week’s content.

The quiz results armed the team with a new understanding of where the skills gaps lay, allowing the team to adjust its strategy. They decided to try discontinuing large-group teaching so they could dedicate time to small-group instruction to overcome specific skills gaps detected via the weekly quizzes. In this way, the quizzes served as a test of the team’s broader strategy of focusing on individualized small-group instruction during the independent practice component of the week’s lesson. The adaptation worked, and scores among the target students began to rise. Teachers motivated students by displaying the names of students who scored well on the weekly quizzes on the classroom walls.

### Continuous Monitoring and Analysis: Iteration Yields Insights

Throughout the BTA process, DMGroup experts and performance coaches push team members to identify the root causes of issues by asking a series of “why” questions—the Five Whys Approach. At each level of examination, teams support their assertions with data. The root cause analysis, while sometimes frustrating, ensures that teams do not waste time and effort pursuing a mere symptom of the underlying problem.

## Columbus MS Math Root-Cause Analysis

As the end of the breakthrough cycle loomed in just a few weeks, the Columbus MS team remained slightly short of achieving its SMART goal. They decided to use the opportunity for professional development by arranging a DMGroup session on using data to improve student outcomes. Soon after, the team noticed a trend in the data: some students in several classrooms were submitting practice assessments on the computer that were completely blank—pressing “continue” at the bottom of each screen and receiving no score at all.

With guidance from performance coach Lander Arrieta, the team hypothesized about the root cause of the problem and how they could bridge the way students practiced in class, using pencil and paper, to a computer-based format, which many standardized assessments used. One teacher on the team suspected behavior issues were at the heart of the students’ failure to complete the assessments. Arrieta carefully probed whether there could be other factors at play. This line of questioning—part of the Five Whys technique—initiated a conversation within the team about how students engaged with the content on the computer. “We engaged the entire team in the dialogue around behavior and work completion and student success,” Arrieta explained. “We asked if students just inherently had behavior issues, or if we could make the content and computer program more accessible for this set of students. What could we do to support every learner in our target group given their diverse sets of needs?”

The team tried having teachers proctor more frequently during class time allotted for completing the practice assessments, and to get assistance immediately from on-site computer/technology coordinators when problems arose. The immediate intervention revealed that many students did not fully understand the computer program. “I discovered students weren’t aware of all the support that the program embedded in the assessments, like step-by-step and video demonstrations,

textbook explanations, virtual tutoring, and more,” one teacher explained. “So, I re-taught how to use these support features. Based on this re-teaching, I also re-taught the students how to access other features of the program, such as online interactive text. These re-teaching moments reinforced students’ learning and helped them get the most out of their math resources. Week seven quiz scores had the highest percent of students passing the quiz in both classes.”

Throughout the cycle, sponsorship teams monitored progress, met with teams once or twice per cycle, and stayed in regular contact with coaches, many of whom worked with multiple teams. Each team’s weekly SMART goal progress was reported to their sponsorship teams, which shared progress with other teams and coaches. This provided both accountability and support, while stimulating constructive competition among teams to achieve their respective goals and drive results.

## Reviewing the Results

At the conclusion of the 10-week cycle, the dedicated teachers and staff of the Columbus MS and 153rd Street ES breakthrough teams reviewed their results, and felt excited and empowered to find that they had succeeded in meeting their respective performance challenges.

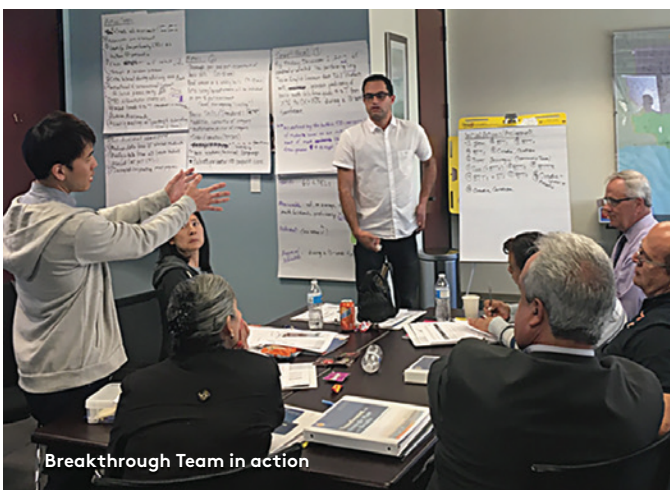
### 153rd Street ES Attendance Team Results

The 153rd Street ES breakthrough team achieved its SMART goal: the 42 chronically absent students averaged 87.1% attendance by the end of the breakthrough cycle, up from 84.7% at the start of the cycle. Overall, the number of students achieving 96% attendance at the school doubled. The team reflected, “By focusing so much attention on attendance, the culture of attendance in kindergarten has dramatically improved. Parents and teachers are more committed to ensuring students are in attendance whenever possible. The insight and input of parents is well received and has given us further insight into the challenges of raising a family in an urban setting.”

The chronic absenteeism rate in 153rd Street ES kindergarten classes dropped from 27% to 9%. School-wide attendance increased by 0.5% compared to the previous year, resulting in 41 additional days of student attendance. The team calculated that the improved attendance rate, extrapolated over the course of a full school year, would add 231 days of student attendance, the equivalent of approximately \$14,000 in recovered lost ADA revenue to the district. Through the first months of the 2018-2019 school year, the gains had persisted.

### Columbus MS Math Team Results

All 23 students in the Columbus MS breakthrough team’s target group reached proficiency on the assessment by the cycle’s end. The



Breakthrough Team in action

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*team reflected, “Through data-driven differentiated instruction, clearly structured small-group time, and regular re-teaching of concepts, among other strategies, the team achieved its goal while fostering ‘the [emergence of] open communication, honest sharing of ideas, constructive criticism, and trust.’ Taking a large abstract goal of raising math achievement and breaking it down into a more specific challenge enabled this team to focus on moving individual students to proficiency.” The team described the benefits of iterating different strategies and measuring their impact on a weekly basis.*

*Their ultimate success created momentum and enthusiasm for continuing the work. The team’s experience provided them with the ability to apply this new skillset to identifying and addressing targeted needs of their students in a collaborative manner; armed with this mindset and toolkit, this team of staff began looking ahead to their next challenge.*

The teachers and staff of the Columbus MS and 153rd Street ES breakthrough teams were proud to take ownership of the change on their campus, making significant progress in areas that had long been challenges. They felt empowered and better equipped to move forward.

### Reflections and Ongoing Benefits

As the BTA cycles concluded, teams met to reflect honestly on the work and crystalize lessons. Team members felt positive about their accomplishments and expressed eagerness to continue the work beyond the 10-week breakthrough period. Teams reported their successes to the larger cohort, and the news of dozens of small victories spread across the district. The entire district and community celebrated the breakthrough teams’ accomplishments. The districts pledged to embark on additional cycles to maintain momentum, tackle additional priorities, and spread the benefits of the leadership and skills development that the Breakthrough Team Approach affords to more participants and teams.

In SY2018-2019, the principal of 153rd Street ES was reassigned and immediately decided to apply the

Breakthrough Team Approach to improve attendance at the new school. In the first two months of the school year, chronic absenteeism stood at 6%, the lowest rate in the school’s history. Having participated in the breakthrough approach, the principal had developed leadership skills and a knowledge of practices that work, and was able to apply these techniques to a new school and have immediate impact. It is precisely this type of capacity building and unleashing of solutions that can be applied elsewhere in the district that make the Breakthrough Team Approach so promising for school districts.

### Conclusion

Reviewing the results, Romero was pleased to see that 75% of the 78 teams had achieved the goals of their performance challenges—a rate that indicated the performance challenge goals had struck the proper balance between achievable and ambitious. Most important to Romero was the knowledge that LAUSD was making strides on its priorities. He was energized to see the BTA participants so confident and excited as they came up with concrete solutions in their individual schools and settings. The small but significant victories were even more satisfying because they gave team members the opportunity to work in pursuit of the district’s goals within their own schools and classrooms. A sponsorship team member summed up the experience by stating, “This process has caused us to look at something specific and incremental, and then seeing this success, we can look at how we can expand.”

One participant reflected on the impact of the process: “What was different about the breakthrough team process was the ability to brainstorm on how to meet the needs of our kids. Education is notorious for giving teachers a solution and saying, ‘Follow this script.’ But this process allowed us to say, ‘Hey! We know our kids. We have a problem. Give us some time to identify it and support us, and we will create and find the solution for every school.’ The excitement that I saw from my staff was that they were empowered. They were going to do the work. There wasn’t going to be something handed to them.”

A Local District South BTA sponsorship team member said, “Just seeing the dramatic growth—especially in a subject like math, which has historically been a struggle for Local District South—among students who have not been achieving well was eye opening. Some of these teachers probably didn’t have the belief that they could do it, that they could see some growth. It opened their eyes and they said, ‘Hey! This approach is working. This is something that we want to do.’ Even principals started saying, ‘If it works, let’s do it everywhere. Let’s do it across all departments.’ I thought it was something very unique.”

The Breakthrough Team Approach had created a tangible sense of momentum and excitement. This approach directly aligned with LAUSD’s stated theory of action to leverage the talents and energy of the district’s educators, administrators, and staff. Romero imagined the impact of multiplying the results of these 78 teams across the district. Small wins across the district added up to significant progress toward district goals, rallying the enormous district to get moving in unison in the right direction. Romero had seen other strategic plans come and go, but this one felt different. The Breakthrough Team Approach was rallying the district, enabling it to put the theory of action into practice, and setting LAUSD on course to realizing the objectives of its strategic plan. ♦

## NOTES

1. Joy Resmovits, “In California, National Test Scores Show Enduring Achievement Gaps,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 9, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/local/education/la-me-edu-california-tests-20180409-htmllstory.html>, accessed September 2018.
2. “L.A. Board Demands Full Funding for Public Education,” LAUSD press release, November 14, 2017, <https://home.lausd.net/apps/news/article/784767>, accessed September 2018; unless otherwise noted, data from “L.A. Unified Fingertip Facts 2017-2018,” updated October 2017, [https://achieve.lausd.net/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=41232&dataid=57579&FileName=NewlyUpdatedFingertip%20Facts2017-18\\_English.pdf](https://achieve.lausd.net/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=41232&dataid=57579&FileName=NewlyUpdatedFingertip%20Facts2017-18_English.pdf), accessed September 2018.
3. Chronic absenteeism was defined as students who missed more than 10% of eligible school days during the school year.
4. The assessment used was the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) Interim Assessment: Expressions and Equations.



To learn about how the Breakthrough Team Approach has been used successfully in LAUSD, watch our video highlighting how LAUSD:

- Targeted specific performance improvements
- Used rapid-cycle techniques to get change moving
- Tackled challenges ranging from Math and ELA to attendance and chronic absenteeism

To watch, visit

<https://info.dmgrouPk12.com/lausd-breakthrough-teams>

## Performance Coaching Builds Capacity

A dedicated DMGroup performance coach works with each team to provide support and build capacity. While many coaches have senior-level experience as a superintendent, principal, or senior leader at a nonprofit or corporation, the coaches are chosen more for their ability to earn the trust and confidence of BTA participants, to help build management and leadership skills, and to coach participants to achieve high-performance results.



Performance coaches accelerate the pace of breakthrough ideas. They push teams to identify new opportunities and focus on problem-solving at a rapid pace that creates momentum and enhances the depth and degree of the breakthroughs experienced. Coaches guide teams to identify and question assumptions and drill down to root causes of obstacles. When teams receive targeted professional development to help them address specific challenges they encounter during their breakthrough work, coaches are able to reinforce those lessons and help teams turn their new skills into action and measurable results.

“An effective performance coach asks: ‘What can I do to enable you to reach your milestones? What challenges do you face in this work? Why are those challenges for you? How might you begin to solve those challenges?’ These questions enable the individual to better perceive the challenge and their own role in creating change as a problem-solver,” said Lander Arrieta, a DMGroup performance coach who worked with LAUSD breakthrough teams, including Columbus MS Math.

# the Breakthrough Team Approach

Empower Teams • Build Leadership Capacity • Achieve Results



There is no faster way to achieve impact than to activate a motivated team to reveal their peak performance capabilities. DMGroup's **Breakthrough Team Approach** combines focused goals, weekly metrics, rapid action cycles, coaching, and targeted professional development to build skills and realize measurable results.

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 [www.dmgroupK12.com](http://www.dmgroupK12.com)

 [info@dmgroupK12.com](mailto:info@dmgroupK12.com)



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