

## **Leading for Ownership: *One School's Story of Commitment, Communication and Transformation***

*"Individual commitment to a group effort – that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work."*

The above quote, from football coaching legend Vince Lombardi, certainly applies to the efforts of schools: the commitment of the individual to the whole is essential. This is especially true when schools are attempting improvements and innovations in teaching and learning to better meet the needs of students.

But what does this look like in practice? What does commitment look like in the modern school house? Schools often resemble hierarchical marvels of early 20th Century top-down efficiency: commitment can be simply a matter of compliance to a well-ordered chain of command. But in the 21st Century, the mission and the work of teaching all students well has become so complex that we often need many minds working together on school improvement and innovation. The commitment and contributions of each individual in the school are crucial to the successes of change initiatives.

If the voices and the ideas of teachers are to be engaged effectively, what does this mean for leadership? How do school leaders involve faculty in efforts to improve school-wide practice? We often hear of the importance of creating teacher "buy-in" for the changes needed in schooling, but what do we really mean by this? And is buy-in sufficient? Are there other more important factors at work to ensure full participation and commitment in the heavy lifting of school improvement?

Consider the story of Tacoma, Washington's Lincoln High School. In February 2014, leaders at this 1400 student urban high school faced a huge hurdle. They were directed by the district to bring staff up to date on a radical plan to transform the school. Before giving wholesale support to the plan, Tacoma School District officials wanted to know that a majority of teachers were in agreement to move forward. School leaders at Lincoln not only wanted faculty assent for the plan, they also wanted faculty to *contribute* to the plan.

### **The Lincoln Center: Learning from Innovation**

Lincoln, centered in one of the more impoverished areas of the region, had been at the forefront of innovative ideas in the Pacific Northwest. As a product of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's small school experiment in the 2000's, The Lincoln Center, a 400-student school-within-a-school, was created.

The Lincoln Center's founding teachers and leaders studied successful charter schools of the past decade, looking at programs such as KIPP schools and the Harlem Children's Zone, considering what might be learned from charter models. The program they designed featured an extended school day, cultural enrichment that stressed character and academic grit, and a commitment to mission-driven, no-excuses teaching.

And it worked. By its third year of operation in 2011, The Lincoln Center boasted a graduation rate of 95%, higher than district and state averages, much higher than the rate for the remainder of students at Lincoln High School, the building that hosted their efforts.

Almost from the beginning, and especially given the results, some questions arose. *Isn't there an issue of equity here in a high-poverty neighborhood, especially if The Lincoln Center has clearly found some answers to the puzzle of how to improve student achievement with high-poverty urban students? Can't the whole school operate as The Lincoln Center does to achieve the same results?*

With these questions in mind, The Lincoln Center was allowed to grow by 30 to 40 students per year to accommodate increasing demand from students and families. And while this incremental growth unfolded naturally, a deliberate full-scale expansion was yet to come.

### **Multilateral Leadership**

With the expansion of the Lincoln Center, one might suppose that tensions would arise between the two faculties occupying the Lincoln building. This has often been the case with shared school buildings, but faculty and leadership representing both The Lincoln Center and its surrounding Lincoln High School often worked together in professional development sessions and to help solve instructional and behavioral problems that both schools experienced.

Much of this cooperation has to do with principal Pat Erwin, a cerebral, charismatic leader who often lends (or gives away) books on the latest ideas in education and social policy to his teachers. He is also the kind of leader who attracts capable and talented individuals to his school. Part of the reason for this is that Erwin knows that his vision, expertise, and energy alone can't sustain innovations like The Lincoln Center.

“I like to think *with* people” he says, admitting that he is a “process person” who likes to talk through innovations in teaching with others.

Indeed, to effect change at the school Erwin has had to draw on the knowledge and experience of the individuals on the faculty. In this, his approach resembles what Senge, Hamilton and Kania (2015) have referred to as “system leadership.” System leaders, say the authors, “build relationships based on deep listening” so that “networks of trust and collaboration start to flourish” in an organization (Senge, Hamilton, & Kania, 2015, para. 8). This is exactly what Erwin and leaders at the school have done. Over the last several years, key structural pieces designed to enhance networks of collaboration across the school and give teachers voice and decision-making power have been put into place. These allow teachers to talk with one another, to share ideas, and co-create solutions to pressing problems.

This collaboration between teachers and leaders produced the Professional Development Leadership Team (PDLT), a working group of teachers, administrators, an embedded instructional coach, and the occasional consultant. Charged with the task of overseeing the school’s professional learning system, the PDLT is distinct from the conventional Site-Based Decision-Making Team (a feature of all Tacoma schools). The PDLT zeros in on the adult learning system in the building, enabling teachers to have voice and input in their own professional learning.

In PDLT meetings, team members often preview professional development activities, giving crucial feedback on clarity and relevance before they are presented to the full faculty. For instance, when Washington State introduced its new teacher evaluation system in 2014, the PDLT worked with a state facilitator to present the system to the faculty in a way that addressed the particular concerns of the faculty. While other schools in the state received a boilerplate introduction, Lincoln was engaged in a relevant discussion geared towards the questions and interests of its faculty. The team’s approach on professional development has enabled faculty to take ownership for multiple initiatives in the school, from AVID strategies, to the adoption of a new English curriculum, to revamping grading and assessment systems. Inquiry Groups, another key structure, are built into the schedule each Wednesday for an hour before school begins. These groups, which meet in both content-alike and across content area configurations, allow teachers to gather in small groups for collaborative time during which they consider an inquiry question they have designed to strengthen their practice. Student engagement techniques, in-the-moment formative assessment strategies, and strategies to foster academic tenacity and grit, have been explored by Lincoln teachers.

The leadership teams at Lincoln have been influenced by the work of University of Pittsburgh researcher Carrie Leana (2011) regarding the positive results around *social capital* among school faculties. As Leana has noted, strong social capital, characterized by strong communication between teachers with “high trust and frequent interaction” (p. 33). This points to the power of lateral communication and collaboration. It creates a situation where teachers use one another as sources of knowledge and expertise around ways to improve practice.

These describe a unique approach to leadership that cultivates collective leadership throughout the building, which in turn allows the faculty to respond to issues they encounter in a reflective, proactive, and productive way. Almost 20 years ago the writer Robert Evans (1996) described *binary leadership* to describe an optimal leadership model that is neither top-down nor bottom-up. It is *binary*; communication of objectives flow in both directions. At Lincoln we see a version of what Evans was driving at: the two poles empower one another. The locus of leadership shifts as principal Erwin inspires faculty participation and co-leadership, while Lincoln’s engaged, empowered faculty provides the energy and intellectual involvement to handle any change process.

The significance of these elements in effective communication and distributed leadership at the school cannot be overstated. This is not simply a lateral, sideways model of teacher leadership and discourse. It is a *multilateral* leadership model, an infrastructure for communication, with pathways for teacher talk and discourse that move in multiple ways, up and down between administrators and faculty, and sideways among faculty.

### **Transforming a School**

By the 2013-14 school year, The Lincoln Center had grown to represent almost half of the school’s population of 1400. With this growth, managing two programs had become operationally and culturally unwieldy. The Lincoln Center would have to either be scaled back considerably or expanded to serve the whole population. Scaling it back would make the school vulnerable to charter schools, whose recent appearance in Washington threatened to siphon away students, along with members of a Lincoln Center teaching force who already understood the complexities of effectively teaching an urban population.

Expanding the school, which had been talked about since the dawn of The Lincoln Center, was now seen as the best option and an expansion plan was put forth by school leaders. The district, which could have mandated the change, asked Lincoln's leadership to bring the faculty to a consensus on the plan. The solution lay in an authentic and thorough communication plan, engaging teachers in ways that enabled highly-informed decisions on the future of the school.

So early on a rainy February morning, Principal Erwin gathered the joint Lincoln and Lincoln Center faculty to pose the very same challenge that had energized the creation of The Lincoln Center in the first place: the advent of charter schools in the neighborhood. Here Erwin took a competitive stance, one that has fueled national conversations about charters and school privatization plans for decades, and asked his traditional public school faculty to compete with charters.

"Charters," he told his staff, "will bring new practices and expectations to the region. Most charters have, for instance, an expectation that each student will graduate ready to attend a four year college. There might be some debate about this among public school teachers in Tacoma, but for charters that debate is over: college is the goal.

"Additionally," he said, "charters will feature personalized learning; extended school days with learning support for students; and integrated wraparound services for students' physical and emotional health, through partnerships with local organizations.

"The best charters," he continued, "demonstrate a high degree of family satisfaction and allegiance, have high graduation rates, high standardized test scores, and a high rate of students accepted to college."

To close the conversation, Erwin asked his faculty several questions, beginning with a reflective one: "How has Lincoln been successful?" Then moved to the practical: "What challenges or concerns do you think Lincoln High School will encounter when charters enter the region?" And, "What could be done to improve or enhance Lincoln High School learning activities for all students in the future?"

The implicit questions Erwin asked of his faculty were, *Do we have the ability to offer our students experiences comparable to charters? Do we have the in-house expertise to graduate all students ready for college?* Given that The Lincoln Center had already successfully done this, the answer was most decidedly yes. But putting this in the form of a question had an intentional objective. Erwin wasn't forcing their hand on this innovation. He wanted them to construct their own rationale to expand - or not.

He asked faculty to respond to a list of five scenarios which ranged from "do nothing and see what happens," to an option to rein in the size of The Lincoln Center, to a full expansion of The Lincoln Center to the whole high school. It was significant that not one of the building's 85 teachers voted for the "do nothing" option. In fact, the participation level was high: almost half of teachers—now used to sharing ideas, talking with one another and being heard on all major decisions through the PDLT and their Inquiry Groups—responded with extensive written comments. In the end, a majority of teachers, by a margin of 93%, approved an expansion of The Lincoln Center to the whole school. This newly empowered faculty not only approved the change, but added 37 pages of ideas for the six-member team of administrators and teacher leader-designers to incorporate into the new design. It was dubbed Lincoln 2.0, and a new school—with a longer school day—was launched in September of 2014.

### **Transforming Teaching**

While faculty input and engagement was crucial to the successful implementation of the new structure for the high school, there was a similar—and intended—effect on the teaching in the school, with teachers implementing changes and in-the-moment solutions to issues that they saw in their classrooms.

An immediate change, inspired by The Lincoln Center's extended-day structure and now part of the whole school design, is *Seminar* - a full class period set aside during the middle of the school day for student academic support. Seminar has its genesis in the faculty and administration partnership that designed Lincoln 2.0, but since the launch of that effort, Seminar has become entirely teacher-driven, with content-alike Inquiry Groups driving much of the project. Derived from the learning during the Lincoln Center years that, for students in Lincoln's high-poverty, high-needs demographic, it is not enough to teach academics well, attention must be paid to the *skills for learning* that students possess.

Indeed, one of the primary learnings from the charter school movement that The Lincoln Center brought to Lincoln is the idea that character counts: the non-cognitive skills of persistence and tenacity and even study skills need to be addressed and taught explicitly. The primary mission of Seminar is to develop scholarship. It is a deliberate attempt to, in the words of Lincoln's instructional coach, "fill the gap" that is sometimes felt when a parent in a high poverty environment is absent from the student's academic life, with good *scholarly* skills and habits. Lincoln scholars are expected to comport themselves as engaged participants in their own learning, observing appropriate and traditional behavioral norms, while at the

same time, using their minds well, as critical thinkers with a strong sense of intellectual character and integrity.

Underlying Seminar, and indeed all classes and activities at Lincoln, is yet another teacher-designed feature of the school, the Lincoln *Instructional Handbook*. Another holdover idea from The Lincoln Center, and redesigned with support from the PDLT, the 43-page Handbook is a compilation of the classroom norms, techniques and strategies that teachers have found to be highly effective with Lincoln's particular student. The *Handbook* (which is online: <http://www.tacoma.k12.wa.us/lincoln/Pages/Teacher-Resources.aspx>) was created over the past several years and reflects the breadth and depth of relevant professional development activities undertaken at the school in that time, from AVID, to Harvard Project Zero's *Visible Thinking Routines*, to math "studios" run by Oregon's Teachers Development Group and others.

The document opens with the school's mission statement, and from there, lays out expectations for each classroom in the building. All teachers, for instance, will have a "snapshot" slide of the period's activities on the classroom SmartBoard. This consists of a "do now" or introductory activity for students, a learning target, and an agenda for the class period. From here techniques are grouped under various headings: critical thinking routines, techniques for collaboration and classroom discussion join sections on writing and formative assessment techniques. A technique like *Think Pair Share*, adapted from Project Zero, which gives students time to think about a given topic or question and then process their own thoughts by discussing with a peer, includes both a rationale and a discussion by Lincoln teachers on how it can be used in different classroom settings.

As a document, the *Handbook* is an expression of good teaching at the school. It stands as the foundational statement of common expectations and precise common language on teaching. This is not unimportant.

Paul Bambrick-Santoyo (2012) notes the importance of "framing" a common language toward a more efficient, well functioning work environment for teachers, as well as defining the commonly held and focused conception of what effective teaching and learning looks like for all students in the school (p. 148).

Given all of the work on transforming Lincoln, the question inevitably arises, is it working? Does the change equate to better outcomes for students? In the initial seven months of the expansion to Lincoln 2.0, the answer is that it is probably too soon to tell definitively. But early-indicator data, such as attendance data looks positive; no noticeable drop off in enrollment occurred after the 2.0 expansion and the longer school day. And teachers report positive correlations between students' performance in Seminar and their academic achievement.

And it should be noted that this work takes place within a context of high growth in graduation rates over the last five years in Tacoma high schools. In December of 2014, local news outlets reported that Tacoma School District had increased the district-wide graduation rate to 78% in 2014 from a low of 55.3% in 2010. Within this district growth, Lincoln posted the greatest growth among the district's six comprehensive high schools 79% in 2014 up almost 33 percentage points from a low in 2010 of 46.3% (Stokes, 2014).

What is clear is that Lincoln's collective commitment to powerful teaching has transformed the student experience. Through dynamic collaboration and the synthesis of ideas from many minds, in a general atmosphere of growth, Lincoln staff is positioned to accelerate the learning for each and every one of their students.

### **The Power of Authorship and Ownership**

When thinking about Lincoln's transformation over the last few years, what is significant is not that innovative, collaborative work has been done, it is the actual *way* in which that work has gotten done. In contrast to many change efforts in school systems, at no point was it explicitly or implicitly communicated that staff should "buy-in" or, "get on board." Rather, leadership capitalized on the power of faculty authorship and ownership by using communication grounded in trust, transparency, and inclusion with embedded opportunities for input. Speaking to the heart, soul, and mind of his staff, Erwin and his leadership team sought commitment from each and every member.

Many systems spend a lot of energy on getting staff to "buy-in" to new initiatives and so often this becomes an exercise in compliance. A teacher may buy-in to a change, but are they committed? In transformative work, changes that are highly adaptive in nature, that may confront peoples' most deeply held values, need true commitment from staff (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). Multilateral leadership fosters

commitment to common goals by spreading authorship and ownership to more than just those at the top of a chain of command. It communicates a “we’re all in this together” message and positively affects the climate and culture of the organization.

Through its networks of leadership teams and small teacher-run Inquiry Groups, Lincoln has created communicative structures that move beyond the typical notion of teacher buy-in to authentic ownership. The implicit objective of these groups is to engage the teacher in the process as a participant, an author, a creator, and an owner in the development of new techniques in the classroom—a redesigned approach to schooling.

### **Leadership that Fosters Commitment and Sustainable Improvement**

So what can be learned from Lincoln’s story and what are the implications for leadership that inspires commitment to school improvement?

**Authentic network structures.** Develop a multilateral leadership and communicative model comprised of networks of professional groupings with protocols that allow educators to communicate with one another and up and down the chain of authority productively. These groupings grow from needs and challenges inherent in the work and provide venues for conversation and collaborative problem solving.

**Ownership for empowerment.** Avoid artificial “buy-in.” Use facts and data with staff and guiding questions to facilitate conversation to come to decisions collectively. Eliciting staff ideas, including staff in decisions, planning, professional development, and implementation strategies allows staff to put their handprint on the work and see themselves reflected in it. Recognizing strengths in staff and “slicing up the pie” capitalizes on embedded talent and makes the work truly collaborative. Empower the people doing the work.

**Input for smart work.** Provide multiple opportunities and iterations for input, reaction and response to ideas, plans and decisions. Teachers that work at Lincoln know that they will be tapped to give their insights and perspectives on teaching and learning at the school. Giving faculty voice engages them in the conversation about the work of school improvement. If many hands make for light work, then many voices make for smart work. Opportunities to voice opinions keeps conversations “above ground” encouraging productive discourse needed to fuel a healthy culture.

**Honesty, transparency and trust.** For school leaders, it is important to make public the what, why, and how of decisions. Share information in a variety of ways through various avenues. Being empathetic and putting yourself in the shoes of faculty considering, “Is this something I would want or need to know?” can help determine what is important or what is simply too much information. A climate of honesty and trust are essential to transformation.

This last point is perhaps the heart of what we’ve learned from our work with Lincoln about leadership that bridges roles, negotiates challenges, and brings about the results all students need for success in their future. And nowhere is the need for honesty, transparency, and trust more critical. The work of schools is complex and, at times, can seem dehumanizing. Yet it is the most human of all enterprises as educators strive to reach into the hearts and minds of their students.

Success is possible only when educators can attend to these challenges with *their* minds and their hearts, seeing true purpose in their daily work and engaging in meaningful discourse. A human-centered approach, having real conversations about real challenges and real solutions for, and by, real people, connects faculty and moves them to commit to the work. In fact, true commitment to school change and innovation may not be possible without these conditions being met. Appealing to the heart, mind and soul of people can bring a staff together - seeing true purpose in their days, engaging in meaningful discourse, and rallying in the camaraderie of working toward a collective goal.

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### **Bios**

Michael N. Martin is a Seattle-based instructional coach, consultant and most recently, a Project Director for The Lincoln Center Project in Tacoma. He has recently contributed to *unBoxed: A Journal of Adult Learning in Schools*.



Christine H. Hoyos is a partner and coach with Abeo School Change, a non-profit education group in Seattle, WA. She has recently contributed to *unBoxed: A Journal of Adult Learning in Schools*. Her blogs are available at <http://abeosc.blogspot.com>



Harriette Thurber Rasmussen is a partner and coach with Abeo School Change. She is a co-author of *Change Leadership: A Practical Guide to Transforming our Schools* and more recently has contributed to the *Journal of Staff Development*. Her blogs are available at [www.abeoschoolchange.org/blog](http://www.abeoschoolchange.org/blog) and <http://abeosc.blogspot.com>.



Michael N. Martin  
Instructional Coach and Consultant  
11019 Fremont Avenue North  
Seattle, WA 98133  
206.300.5378  
[michaelnmartin@icloud.com](mailto:michaelnmartin@icloud.com)  
Christine H. Hoyos  
School and Leadership Coach  
Abeo School Change  
2226 Eastlake Avenue East #43

Seattle, WA 98102

360.296.8449

[chris@abeoschoolchange.org](mailto:chris@abeoschoolchange.org)

Harriette Thurber Rasmussen

Organizational Development and Leadership Coach

Harriette.rasmussen@gmail.com