



## Come ride with us: Walker Gamble's collective leadership journey

**Jessica Boyington, Fourth-grade math and science teacher, and  
Allen Kirby, Principal, Walker Gamble Elementary School**

Drive through town — turn right. Take in the scenery of cornfields and roll your windows down to get the full effect. As you approach our school nestled in a few old buildings, you are reminded of a quieter, simpler time; you might even be tempted to underestimate the learning community and the people who live, learn, work, and play within its walls. However, do not let the setting fool you — we are an innovative learning community of school and community stakeholders who are meeting the needs of our diverse population.

In the past, the needs of our students greatly reflected the needs of the immediate community. Founded in 1953 by concerned citizens as a way to provide a better education for the community's African American population, our school and community used this vision as a platform to provide a top-notch education for all students. In the past, our students learned, grew, married, and lived right here in our community, making the educational needs of all students very similar. However, as we welcomed the 21st century and all that it had to offer, we realized that we needed to better involve the community as a whole — students, community members, parents, teachers, and administrators — in the school's decision-making process. We discovered that we could meet the goals of our students for higher education, whether community college, trade school, or a four-year university, when we simply asked for their input and the input of those closest to them.

This realization led to the implementation of collective leadership within our school. Through this initiative, all members of our learning community have the opportunity to lead. Teachers lead professional learning communities in their areas of expertise, community members lead by teaching lessons on varying topics, and groups of learners lead in areas of student government and conferences. This change in leadership has provided unity and growth in our school, and it is a model that we are confident will benefit other educational facilities. Come visit us! You just might find a little peace and quiet, and you will definitely experience education as you never have before.

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## Principal's perspective

When talking about collective leadership, I try to use pronouns purposefully. When listening to others, if the pronouns I/my/they are being used instead of we/our/us, that is an immediate sign that collective leadership has not yet reached the level of commitment necessary to maximize success. That being said, forgive me for the next few sentences when I speak about myself using the first-person point of view. This is not who I am, nor the way I lead.

When I think about myself as a leader, I have never fully fit into one of the typical leadership styles. There were components of a few that I could relate to such as shared leadership, but even that didn't fully embody my way of thinking or how I wanted to lead. Shared leadership usually includes the skills of only a few people in a school or organization. I wanted everyone in the school or organization to know they mattered and were vital to the success of the school. So after eight years of teaching and three as an assistant principal, the dream job of being the principal of [Walker Gamble Elementary](#) (WGE) found me.

But the unique perspective I had upon being called to this job was no accident. I attended WGE and went through the school system as a student. During college, I was able to student teach and begin my teaching career at WGE. As challenging as it was, leaving to become an assistant principal in another district was one of the best things that I could have done. I was able to grow as a leader and was given freedom to lead without parameters. Becoming a teacher at WGE and bringing administrator experience from outside of the district truly prepared me for how I wanted to lead at Walker Gamble.

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During my first year as principal at WGE, I was able to bring in a new assistant principal and literacy coach. It was evident that shared leadership had to be established as a first step. That first year was the foundation of what we would become. My assistant principal and literacy coach took active roles in many facets of the school. Our faculty and staff needed to see this and understand this type of leadership before we could truly reach our potential as a school. There were some bumps in the road, but we overcame them together, and everyone started to realize that it didn't always have to be the principal making all the decisions. Decisions could be made by multiple people working together to meet the needs of our students.

It finally started to come together in year two. We were selected to be a pilot school for the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) [Collective Leadership Initiative](#) (CLI). This would be where we discovered the leadership style that embodied everything that I believed in: "Lead from where you are" and "Blur the lines between teachers and administrators" were just two of the tenets that made an impact on us as a school.



## Teacher's perspective

What is culture? During my first few years of teaching, I was handed deadlines, basals, standards, pacing guides, order of authority, and many other resources to ensure my success as a teacher. For many years, I was under the impression that this was the only way a school could operate. While there were many benefits to this type of system, there were also many limitations keeping me from being the teacher I wanted to be. Many times I felt as if everything I planned had to fit inside of a cookie-cutter model that did not always seek what was best for my students. I felt very limited with the set lines of authority and the flow of communication. Certain lines were drawn with this type of leadership, and I was not experienced or confident enough to cross those boundaries. Until one day...

Six years ago, an entirely new leadership team began their first year as principal, assistant principal, and literacy coach at our school. High anxiety pulsed through the building as we all knew this was one of the biggest changes Walker Gamble had ever experienced. The first year of this new leadership structure was solely based on developing relationships, so the new leaders were seen in every classroom and hallway as well as at lunch, recess, and in arrival and dismissal areas. Through these visits all staff members began relationships with the leaders and developed trust in one another. For the first time in my career, I felt as if I was working with the leaders and not for them.

During the second year, I was called into the principal's office.

As you can imagine, I had already played out many scenarios in my head, wondering what boundary I had crossed and how I was going to fix potential problems. To my surprise, my principal explained to me that after observing my teaching for the past year and my interactions with people (staff, students, and parents), he would like me to accompany him in the foundational work of the CLI supported by the SCDE. He explained this initiative with a few words: "This is the way we are going to lead, and there is no other way." I was hooked by the word *we*, and at that moment, with very little knowledge, knew I wanted to be a part of the journey.

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The first year of CLI, the Kellogg Foundation generously supported our school through piloting a position for a classroom teacher to spend half-time teaching and half-time working with areas of leadership. I was fortunate enough to be asked to become the hybrid teacher for this one-year pilot. During this time, I had the best of both worlds. I was able to teach my fifth graders math three days a week and then work with other teachers, leaders, and staff members two days a week. During the two days that I was not in the classroom, I was able to be involved with many projects that supported educating the whole child.



For the first time in 25 years, our school's overall schedule was changed due to our principal listening to many teachers talk about their classrooms being constantly interrupted throughout the day or students being pulled at all times. To verify the need for a schedule change and ground it in data, our whole staff engaged in personalized learning about how our time was spent. We did this by pursuing a micro-credential (MC) that required us to track and analyze how our time was spent. Using the information gathered from earning the MC, a team of teachers, staff members, and students was created to develop a schedule that would maximize instructional time and include a block for all intervention to happen simultaneously throughout the grade levels. While the schedule was one of the first significant changes, it didn't stop there.

Over the next several years, this way of leading together sparked many changes in our culture. Teachers are using planning periods to go into one another's classrooms to gain ideas and insight on particular strategies, to offer support, and to self-reflect. Professional Learning Communities and faculty meetings are being led by teachers. Committees are now created by teachers based on their areas of interest, and complainers have evolved into problem solvers. Every decision, big or small, is made together.

As this culture shift began, the most obvious impact was initially noticed by teachers and staff. But soon the students also began to notice the difference from how things used to be. As this collective decision-making started to pour over into classrooms, students became leaders. Grade levels were teamed into "houses," creating chants, flags, dances, and many other team representations. A group of students developed a Kindness Crew to spread compassion and address bullying.

### **The future of collective leadership**

Currently, Walker Gamble is moving through the first of two consolidations in back-to-back years. Changes in district-level leadership can create anxiety and uncertainty. Challenging times put the culture of a school to the test. But because of our past collective leadership efforts and results, we are built for times like these. WGE consistently leads the way, according to efficacy and conditions survey results. This data shows that more than 90 percent of teachers at WGE consider themselves leaders beyond the classroom. We strongly believe (4.63 out of 5) that teachers and administrators can collectively solve even the most difficult problems, and our team strongly believes (4.5 out of 5) that they are making a significant educational difference in the lives of our students. What we have

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established is how we will thrive, regardless of circumstances outside of our control. The problems that we must face and the needs that we need to meet for our students will continue to be our problems, not my problems

We will continue to work together in the best interests of our students. As the state and nation struggle with the recruitment and retention of teachers, we will continue to build a culture and a place where educators and students want to be. Each year, we have an abundance of interest to join our family here at Walker Gamble. Of the educators that we lose, most are retiring with 30 or more years of experience and with the majority of those years spent at WGE. That speaks volumes about what it means to be a part of this culture and why collective leadership is the catalyst for change that education needs and our students deserve.

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Jessica Boyington is a fourth-grade math and science teacher at Walker Gamble Elementary in New Zion, South Carolina. Jessica earned her bachelor's degree in elementary education from Francis Marion University. She has taught grades three through five, small group Gifted and Talented, and has served as a STEAM Lab instructor. She has also worked alongside the State Department of Education with the Collective Leadership Initiative (CLI), promoting leadership within schools. She has three beautiful children, Johnny, Sawyer, and Arlee Kate, and an exceptionally supportive family that has allowed her to invest love, time, and dedication to her career.



Allen Kirby is the principal at Walker Gamble Elementary located in New Zion, South Carolina. Allen earned a Bachelor's of Science in Elementary Education at Francis Marion University and a Master's in Education from Cambridge College. He also earned a degree of Education Specialist in Leadership. Allen started his career at Walker Gamble, teaching second and third grade for eight years. He then transitioned to being the assistant principal at Johnsonville Middle School for three years. For the past six years, Allen was able to return home as the principal for Walker Gamble Elementary. Allen is married to Abbie Kirby and they share two children, Cal and Caroline.