



## From the principalship to the state department: My building capacity journey

**Tom Smith, Education Associate, South Carolina Department of Education**

I nervously prepared for my performance-based interview with the South Carolina Department of Education Office of Educator Effectiveness and Leadership Development (OEELD). While I felt prepared and confident, my nerves were a result of desperately wanting this job because of the impact I felt I could make with future and current leaders.

I was asked to present a brief mock lesson to educational leaders about any topic I deemed important to grow leaders. The topic I chose was building capacity. Why? It is the cornerstone of my own personal journey and leadership development.

Throughout my career, I have found that building capacity improves culture, morale, and staff retention. This has become increasingly important and relevant in light of the recent pandemic and nationally reported teacher shortages. It's amazing what a team of educators can achieve when they have an opportunity to initiate, design, and implement solutions to questions or needs in their school as opposed to being told what to do.

At the conclusion of my interview, one of the panelists asked, "If you had to do this interview over again, would you pick the same topic?" I only paused for a second because I thought, Oh no, that's not what they wanted to hear. But I responded confidently: "No, I would not change the topic because I am a product of my experiences, and I have no desire to lead any other way."

After I was hired, I learned that the person who asked me if I would change my interview topic was Libby Ortmann. Libby currently leads the [Collective Leadership Initiative](#) (CLI) in our office. I imagine she wanted to know how committed I was to this way of leading. In our office, one of our priorities is leading collectively, and I believe that is one of the reasons I was hired.

When I joined the OEELD team, I was tasked with facilitating two programs for the South Carolina Department of Education: Instructional Leadership Academy (ILA) is for new assistant principals from around the state, and Building Instructional Capacity (BIC) is a new program I was asked to develop. BIC is open to anyone from teacher leaders to principals. Additionally, I mentor first-year principals in the Principal Induction Program (PIP).



Tom Smith currently serves as an Education Associate with the South Carolina Department of Education where he serves on the Leadership Development Team. Tom has served 35 plus years as a public educator. The first 32 years, as a school-based educator, and the last 14 as a high school principal.



Each of my three primary responsibilities gives me an opportunity to regularly share my building capacity journey with aspiring and current leaders. Specifically, aspiring leaders are learning to lead from where they are by inviting themselves to the table based on their passion and skill. They also learn the importance of influencing colleagues across grade levels and content areas.

With current leaders, I focus on the following four tenets to help them understand the impact building capacity can have on being better tomorrow than we are today.

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### **Leadership is about asking the right questions of the people closest to the work.**

Leadership is not about telling others how to do their jobs. It's asking the right questions of those closest to the work so that they can be part of developing the road map to success.

My years as principal leading Union Grove High School (UGHS) had the greatest impact on my belief in the power of building capacity. Prior to my arrival in February 2007, UGHS was already a high achieving high school. The community, parents, and staff had high expectations. Historically, UGHS posted the highest achievement metrics in a very large school district and had many state and national accolades. The challenge for me was to determine how we could improve on this. There were some, myself included, who felt as if we had become comfortable with our achievement, yet we still had pockets of students who weren't reaching their full potential.

To start, we determined that we had to focus on subgroups of students who struggled with academic performance, behavior, and/or attendance. If we could move the needle with these students, the overall numbers would move as well. For example, our graduation rate at the time was 84.9 percent, but our team was completely surprised and embarrassed when I showed them we were graduating only half of our students with disabilities. The question or problem of practice was clear: how do we do things differently to ensure our historically underperforming students have the same opportunity for growth as our successful students?

### **Collegial collaboration is important when seeking sustainable solutions.**

One of the great benefits of building capacity is the ability to attack a problem of practice with teams made up of diverse perspectives. It is important to put people on the same team who have the will to put students first but don't always see a solution in the same way.

I knew if we wanted to sustain yearly incremental growth as a measure of success we would have to figure out how to be better tomorrow than we were today. This would require leveraging the collective genius within the school.



We began by discussing that deficits or problems of practices are not isolated events, nor does the responsibility for fixing these problems rest on one team or individual's shoulders. Our students belonged to all of us! Our low graduation rate for students with disabilities was not the sole responsibility of our special education teachers. The staff realized that graduation wasn't isolated to senior year; rather, graduation is a K–12 endeavor. With this belief, our department chairs started to have strategic horizontal and vertical conversations.

I am happy to report in our nine years at UGHS our overall graduation rate went from 84.9 percent to 94 percent, and more importantly, our graduation rate for our students with disabilities went from 50 percent to 74 percent. Together, we sustained and made gradual increases from year to year.

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### **Leaders should model the trust process by building the capacity of their team and allowing them to lead the work.**

As leaders we sometimes expect our team to give us the benefit of the doubt by asking them to trust the process. As long as our content and grade level teams displayed the skill and the will, we at UGHS encouraged them to lead the work. We just needed to ask the right questions based on our data and school needs and build a culture of support, collaboration, and trust that would encourage their collaboration.

### **Capacity building is a process by which collaboration, not compliance, drives change.**

It's amazing what a team of educators can achieve when they don't care who gets the credit and when those closest to the work have an opportunity to initiate, design, and implement solutions to problems of practice in their school as opposed to being told what to do. As a result of our efforts, UGHS continued to be the highest performing high school in the district and also became a high school that consistently surpassed its own high stakes achievement data from one year to the next over the course of nine years.

Regardless of your position or experience, **you** can impact growth in yourself and others. Your influence has no boundaries. I challenge each of you to take that next step. Find someone who has the skill and will and support them to develop to their full capacity. Everyone wins when we focus on getting better tomorrow than we are today.

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