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# Collective leadership in action: What our school learned when we put students in charge

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When you think of schools today, what do you picture? Do you see an authority figure making the “Mwah wah wah” sound made famous in Charlie Brown cartoons? What if you could shift this stereotype from complacency to authentic engagement? What if students were empowered to contribute, make a difference, and learn?

All of this is possible with collective leadership.

## Principal Perspective:

In 2020, our school, Leavelle McCampbell Middle School (LMMS), began the shift from a few teachers working in a building as teacher leaders to **all** teachers working on action teams through the collective leadership process. Our next challenge was “How do we shift from teacher action teams to **student** action teams to empower all of our learners?”

We transformed our six teacher action teams—social emotional learning, direct lessons, new and ongoing staff learning, family and community engagement, empowering instruction, and leadership environment—into the [Ron Clark Academy \(RCA\) houses](#) (Nukumori, Isibindi, Onraka, Amistad, Protos, and Reveur).

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To be conscientious of the effort it would take to shift the mindset to student empowerment, we adopted the houses verbatim. We knew if we spent a great deal of time on building the structure and organization ourselves, we would not be able to commit as much time to shifting the paradigm through thoughtful implementation.

I thought I “knew” what houses were; however, when I went to RCA, I realized houses were much more than I initially realized. They create a sense of belonging through nonacademic opportunities. It seemed risky to try to implement this in a public school. But fear of failure did not keep us from trying something we knew could change students' lives.

Our teacher Lighthouse team, which includes the chairs of all of our action teams, knew we needed structures in place. They outlined a yearly implementation plan for our houses. Each

house has a country of origin, handshake, chant, color, language, and history that unify the members of the house. The plan included the seven habits—careers, colleges, impact projects, community partners, parent involvement activities, cultural events, and health activities—tied to each house’s origin. For the first day of school, we collectively developed a leadership launch rotation for seventh and eighth graders to introduce them to these new concepts.

After providing every student, teacher, and staff member a t-shirt for their house, you could feel the energy rise.

In the words of eighth grader Blake Crawford, “The Houses build on kids’ strengths and focus on what students can do and what they can showcase. . . . I feel like we get to demonstrate our talents because we come up with the ideas.”

“Six houses, one family, you feel like everybody’s a whole. What makes everybody a whole is how we work together,” shared sixth grader Ashley Adams.

When students were asked if Leavelle is better because of houses, eighth grader Dante Toole responded, “Yes, it allows them to expand their friend circle.”

And eighth grader Brooklyn Martin added, “It gives everyone a voice, we come together, and we show our creativity. We can help each other learn our chant and work together.”

On the first day of school in the fall of 2022, Where Everybody Belongs (WEB) leaders were trained to lead orientation for the incoming sixth graders. Student leaders spent two days preparing and learning how to facilitate activities to support incoming students with strategies for success in middle school. They made direct contact with over 200 students, welcoming and inviting them to the first day orientation.

*Collective leadership is a collaborative approach to leadership that values the perspectives and contributions of all members of the community, and it has a powerful impact on student engagement, academic achievement, and overall well-being.*

During the training, students seemed unsure of themselves and self-conscious. As a principal, I was very excited about the opportunity to see if we truly could empower **all students** through houses and mentoring but also extremely nervous and worried it could go horribly wrong. I turned over complete control to children and just let them lead. That day ended up being the best day of my 18 years in education!

Empowering students with collective leadership is crucial in building a strong and inclusive community. When students feel that their voices are heard and their contributions are valued, they are more likely to be engaged and invested in their learning and in the success of their community. Collective leadership is a collaborative approach to leadership that values the perspectives and contributions of all members of the community, and it has a powerful impact on student engagement, academic achievement, and overall well-being.

Collective leadership also promotes innovation and creativity. When students are given the freedom to explore new ideas and approaches, they are more likely to come up with innovative solutions to complex problems. This leads to new insights and discoveries and can help to push the boundaries of traditional thinking. Additionally, when students are encouraged to think

creatively and outside the box, it can help to build their confidence and resilience, which can be essential for success in any field.

### **Counselor Perspective:**

I came to Leavelle McCampbell six years ago from a job that produced a level of compassion fatigue, largely due to working with students primarily involved with criminal charges, students with disabilities, and victims of abuse and neglect.

*A better future comes from giving students the power to lead.*

My first two years at Leavelle were a time of healing, nurturing, and learning the job of a middle school counselor. Dr. Hall's leadership coincided with the beginning of my third year. The timing felt perfect. I was ready to be challenged and stretched professionally. Through the structures and framework that we implemented those first few years with collective leadership, Leader in Me, and now, Houses, I have seen shy sixth graders enter middle school and exit three years later leading their peers and leading in their community.

A better future comes from giving students the power to lead.

Our collective work has resulted in 93 percent of teachers feeling like leaders in recently collected data on belonging and has resulted in a significant decrease in Self-Harm Protocols (from 75 in 2019 to 8 in 2022). The growth in student outcomes and school culture we've experienced is being recognized by external evaluators who awarded our school the 2023 South Carolina Association of Middle Level Educators (SCAMLE) Schools to Watch designation, the 2023 Franklin Covey Education Leader in Me Lighthouse certification, the 2023 Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) Pacesetter Award, and the 2023 South Carolina Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (SCASCD) Whole Child Award.

When collective leadership extends to students, you increase their empowerment and sense of belonging. We recommend looking at your teams and asking: Is there a way to consolidate for impact? Can students be included on our teams? How might we gather data on student belonging?

Put students in charge and watch the power of collective leadership positively impact your school's culture.

**Author Bios:**

Jennifer Minichan has been in education for over 30 years as an elementary counselor, as a Program Specialist at the district level with Special Programs, and as a middle school counselor for the past six years. Recent professional accomplishments include LMMS 2020 Teacher of the Year, 2023 SCAMLE Innovation in Education Award, and co-author of “Enroll, Enlist, or Employ” in the *Palmetto Administrator* Spring 2022 edition.



Dr. Tiffany Hall is the principal of LMMS. She was named 2019 Aiken Standard Top 10 Young Professional to Follow, 2019 Aiken Chamber of Commerce Rising Star, SCASCD 2020 Emerging Leader, ASCD 2020 Emerging Leader, Aiken Heroes Award 2021, 2022 ASCD Champions in Education, and 2022-2024 SC Competency Fellow. LMMS is an SCDE Collective Leadership school. Her team focuses on community, culture, and continuous improvement. In 2023 LMMS earned 2023 SCAMLE School to Watch designation, 2023 Franklin Covey Leader in Me Lighthouse Leader in Me certification, 2023 SREB Pacesetter Award, and 2023 SCASCD Whole Child Award.



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