



Collective Leadership: Laying the Foundation for Success Brick by Brick

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What a year for education! From a life-threatening, quarantine-causing pandemic to extreme racial tensions and unrest, the 2020-2021 school year posed challenges of epic proportions. Many educators and students were forced to leave their comfort zones, not to mention the literal, physical location in a brick and mortar school, and take on the task of engaging in a virtual setting.

Fortunately for Blythewood High School (BHS), a strong foundation laid by collective leadership allowed for the successful navigation of this unpredictable school year. The “bricks” that created this sturdy foundation include: the collective leadership initiative, a principal with a growth mindset and clear vision, and the structure of smaller learning communities within the school.

BHS’s work within the Collective Leadership Initiative (CLI) was facilitated by the South Carolina Department of Education and Center for Teacher Quality (CTQ). This work spurred creative solutions and exponential growth for the entire school community. BHS’s current principal, Matt Sherman, and the structure of smaller learning communities flattened the leadership hierarchy. This allowed teacher and student voices to play a more prominent role in the school.

BHS was invited to participate in the first cohort of the state’s Collective Leadership Initiative largely because of the previously established smaller learning communities (SLCs) and the role of lead teachers. Each SLC has its own leadership team and consists of an assistant principal, an assistant administrator, a school counselor, and a lead teacher. Much of the work through CLI centers around the importance of teachers in leadership positions.

Our CLI partnership was established in 2016. The principal at that time committed to becoming a Collective Leadership school. However, articulating the vision and purpose of collective leadership and how it would work at BHS proved challenging. While the initial leadership structure gave our school a jumpstart toward the collective leadership mindset, it was obvious that the talents of many people were not being used to their highest potential.

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Then, a shift in the principal strengthened the school's foundation.

When Matt Sherman became BHS's principal in 2019, he was determined to continue CLI work. He clarified the vision of collective leadership. Sherman's strong relationship-building skills, coupled with his passionate belief that CLI would provide an even stronger foundation for student achievement and school culture, fueled growth toward a more collective mindset.

Having served as an assistant principal at BHS, Sherman knew he wanted to modify the current structure of leadership meetings. While the meetings provided an effective space for brainstorming and sharing, the ideas generated were rarely actualized in classrooms. So, Sherman changed the meetings from Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) to Professional Action Teams (PATs). This slight shift in language made for big shifts in thinking. It was clear that simply talking and not doing was no longer an option.

Likewise, Sherman and other leaders in the school began to ask more faculty members to lead from where they were. BHS teachers were encouraged to identify and act on their passions and concerns, and they began seeing themselves as leaders beyond their classrooms.

Then, COVID hit.

In the summer of 2020 the leadership team was faced with a mountain of unanswerable questions and challenges that had the potential to compromise school structures. There were serious concerns about the learning and engagement of the forced virtual environment, as well as concerns about the social-emotional well being of students and staff. To better understand and alleviate these challenges, the CLI team invited a student to serve as a member of the team. This student perspective proved pivotal in moving forward with collective leadership.

Then, racial tensions magnified.

Nationally, racial issues and concerns exploded. It was clear that school leadership would need to help students and faculty work through anger, misunderstandings, and personal biases. Over the summer of 2020, some of the leadership team completed a book study of Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist*, and while intentional race conversations began and thoughtful questions were asked, there was a lack of diversity within the book study group. The need to hear from multiple perspectives was evident.



Then, students stepped up.

Our students made it clear they were eager to have these tough conversations and do the work that would propel the community in a positive direction. Leadership was prepared to give them a place at the table and a microphone for their voices.

This was not easy work. But it was necessary work. And it proved to be an invaluable brick added to the already strong BHS foundation.

The Blythwood Racial Issues Committee (BRIC) was established in August 2020. This student-led committee consists of not only students but also teachers, administrators, and staff. The committee began by establishing a mission statement. Next, they shared a student survey to prioritize areas students felt needed the most work at BHS.

The goals of BRIC are to provide students with a supportive environment to share their own experiences, express their personal views, and work toward a better understanding of the experiences of others. As the school year began, it was obvious they were off to a great start.

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In fact, BRIC helped BHS's leadership realize the need to discuss racial issues more explicitly as a staff. At the beginning of the school year, all faculty participated in a debriefing protocol that allowed them to share their own race-related experiences and unpack their feelings about race in America. The discussions were tough but proved fruitful. The entire team learned about the students' establishment of BRIC, and many wanted to know how they could get involved to accelerate the work.

Then, an unexpected crack in the community's foundation occurred.

Homecoming spirit days are a big deal at BHS. Most students participate to show their school spirit and engage in friendly competition to win prizes. On one of the spirit days, two students' actions negatively impacted the community. Their choice of dress sparked a public relations frenzy for the school that was further fueled by the flames of social media. Our school's anti-bias and anti-racism work was put to the test to repair this crack in the school's culture.



Had BHS not established such a strong foundation of collective leadership that included all stakeholders, the students' poor judgment might have taken years to overcome in regards to school culture and public perception. However, with the combined efforts of school leadership and BRIC, students and faculty were able to work through this challenging and sensitive situation to make sure everyone came out on the other side more informed and empathetic.

BRIC is now a cornerstone of Blythewood High School. It began as a community of learners and leaders that were willing to ask the question: "How do we empower more people to help make Blythewood High School a better place?"

BHS leaders don't say, "Here's a problem, and here's how we're going to solve it." Instead, the language has shifted to "Here's the problem. How should we fix it?" and, "What do YOU think are the most pressing problems and best solutions given our resources?" The tenants of CLI have been used to increase faculty collaboration, plan new initiatives, and bring about positive change.

The Collective Leadership Initiative is not a program. It is an investment. BHS is invested in CLI, and this investment will continue to strengthen our school's foundation of growth through collective leadership — brick by brick.

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Susanne Liggett is a National Board Certified Teacher who serves in a hybrid role as a lead teacher at Blythewood High School. She has a master's degree in curriculum and instruction and bachelor's degrees in English, communication, and secondary education. Susanne has been teaching for more than 12 years and has prior work experience in college admissions and the private business sector. Teacher leadership is a passion of Susanne's, and she has been a part of the SC Department of Education's first cohort of Collective Leadership for the past five years. When Susanne is not teaching and learning, she enjoys time with her husband of 15 years and their three young children.