



## Trusting the process

**Dr. Cassandra S. Bosier, Principal, and Brittany Daniels, Literacy Coach, Polo Road Elementary**

“Make it a great day today, Explorers, as we **E**xplore all options, **N**avigate through challenges, and **D**iscover new pathways.” Although it is easy to recite this mantra at the end of the daily news show, the work of the principal is insurmountable if working in isolation. How does one make impactful decisions, establish an influential platform for all partners, manage daily operations, maintain a positive climate, and produce student achievement that meets local, state, and national expectations? Surely, approaching all of this with the **E.N.D.** in mind would help, right?

When Dr. Bosier eagerly assumed her first principalship in January 2017, she had no idea what was to come.

**As Dr. Bosier got to know her staff, she saw that every classroom housed a teacher capable of being more than a follower. How could she invite more voices, tear down classroom-siloed walls, and dismantle perceptions of “administrator-over-all” in the elementary school setting?**

How could she have predicted that **Polo Road** would eventually be named a Title I school? Or a Palmetto Literacy Project School based on the 34 percent of third grade students scoring Does Not Meet on the SC Ready Reading assessment? Or that our multilingual learner population would grow to encompass nearly 40 percent of all students? Or that there would be a global pandemic that would shake the very foundation of the world?

There exists no book or article that clearly ordered her steps in the midst of all of these unknowns. Pondering the knowns, she could only plan to move forward with intentionality and hope that at least a few would follow. What were the knowns? She knew there would be teachers at varying skill levels. She knew there was a need for some “heart work,” and that unfiltered discussions were necessary to do what is best for the students we serve now, not the ones we served then. And she knew that she was walking in, midyear, to lead in a way that would push some away from the work and draw others closer.

She was no stranger to the traditional structures of leadership: a principal leads, and everyone else follows, out of respect or compliance. But as Dr. Bosier got to know her staff, she saw that every classroom housed a teacher capable of being more than a follower. How could she invite more voices, tear down classroom-siloed walls, and dismantle perceptions of “administrator-over-all” in the elementary school setting?



In March 2020, she opened a state department memo, and her eyes scanned then unfamiliar words: the **Collective Leadership Initiative (CLI)**. Aha! In that memo, she saw an E.N.D. in mind.

### **Exploring all options**

Traditionally, grade level teams had a team leader who was the team's liaison to the principal. Having experienced the effects of teams structured that way, we knew it would lead to a hierarchy of sorts. Team leaders were perceived to be the better teachers on the team, creating the illusion that everyone else was less skilled. Inevitably, jealousy and unhealthy competition would follow. "That's the way it's always been" had lost its merit long ago. Why were we designing our school culture in such a way? How could we create an environment where everyone trusted one another to share the weight that is teaching and learning? We needed to explore other options, eradicating the way the culture had been structured in the past.

**How could we create an environment where everyone trusted one another to share the weight that is teaching and learning? We needed to explore other options, eradicating the way the culture had been structured in the past.**

### **Navigating through challenges**

These were not technical shifts, but adaptive ones and had to start with the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) modeling the behaviors we desired from grade level teams. Our vision was that we would become a school of leaders — each person walking in their area of expertise, while holding one another accountable for being knowledgeable in multiple areas, thus modeling how all voices matter to the organization. We also created communication hubs where all faculty and staff could access information without waiting for word from the team leader.

Since our new teachers did not know a Polo Road without CLI, our next challenge became the veteran teachers who held onto what was familiar and comfortable. Our fifth grade team was literally split in half with three teachers who had been here from one year to 16 years and three experienced teachers who were new to our school.

Ms. Wright was appointed the CLI representative her first year at Polo Road. She was apprehensive about this role, having come from a school where coaches or administrators led all meetings. "I had never even thought about how to run a meeting because I never had to," Ms. Wright said of her previous team leader assignment. As team leader, there was no cognitive processing required; she was just the messenger,



regurgitating information from the administrator. In the name of collective leadership, Dr. Bosier intentionally provided very little in terms of a prepared agenda or checklist of things to accomplish. It was her desire to empower teachers, activate their leading potential, and encourage them to design a professional learning team (PLT) that worked for all members. Still, Ms. Wright was shell-shocked.

Ms. Shortman, who had opened the school 16 years before, was often the lone voice in meetings since she had been at the school the longest. She never thought her voice was the most effective or accurate, but someone had to say something, right? Who else was going to bring all the new people up to speed on how we do things?

**In the name of collective leadership, Dr. Bosier intentionally provided very little in terms of a prepared agenda or checklist of things to accomplish. It was her desire to empower teachers, activate their leading potential, and encourage them to design a professional learning team (PLT) that worked for all members.**

Ms. Brewton was next in line in terms of seniority and tended to say little in meetings. She was the team's data specialist, but with a departmentalized team, she never knew what data to bring. She remarked, "No one ever told me what data to talk about. Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it. But without that, I'm just lost."

Ms. Johnson, Ms. Sanders, and Ms. Oliva were new to the school and had all come from schools where team leaders were the leaders of a grade-level team. Unfamiliar with what should be happening, they spent many meetings listening to Mrs. Shortman, though they could not figure out why since Ms. Wright was the CLI representative.

There was one thing the team agreed on: at the beginning of this school year, their PLT meetings were unproductive time wasters, which led to frustration and discomfort. Dropping her head in embarrassment, Ms. Shortman admitted, "We had no clue what to discuss. Each week we would come to the meetings and wonder what we were supposed to be doing." It was clear the team was trudging through the challenges of co-leadership.

### **Discovering new pathways**

As the weeks dragged on, the fifth grade team dreaded their Tuesday meetings. Ms. Wright confessed, "I never slept on Monday nights. I spent the night worrying about what to place on the agenda for



Tuesday's PLT meeting!" She would often painfully ponder over how she could possibly share this seemingly sole responsibility.

After one particularly pointless meeting, leadership revealed to the team that each team member had (at one point or another) complained about how "stupid" these meetings were. We shared some of the ways other teams made these meetings productive and useful and charged them with doing the same.

A new pathway was born.

Ms. Sanders took the lead first. She thought about her experience facilitating data teams at her previous school and devised a plan that would help structure the team's time together. "Honestly, we were meeting on Tuesdays, nothing was getting done, and then we were all having to analyze data and do lesson plans after school. I really tried to think about how we could make this work for us during these PLT meetings." Within days, she shared sample agendas for each Tuesday of the month. They collaborated, making tweaks for their respective content areas and student needs.

Almost immediately, things changed.

"It gave us something meaningful to talk about. Now, we were talking about things that could help with lesson plans," Ms. Brewton recalled.

Ms. Shortman added, "These are the best PLTs I've ever been in! Now I know what to expect each week, and it's on all of us, not just Ms. Wright."

"Now I sleep on Monday nights!" Ms. Wright laughed.

Now the meetings are filled with everyone's voices. "I teach in another hall, so we don't see each other," Ms. Oliva stated. "But in the meetings, I can really talk to Ms. Wright, and she has helped me so much."

Months later, the plan is still in place. Roles are fluid and agendas change weekly. What remains constant is that everyone contributes, and everyone leaves with something valuable.

#### **Roles:**

- ☐ **Facilitator - ALL**
- ☐ **Time Keeper- Brewton**
- ☐ **Note Taker - Johnson**
- ☐ **Norm Moderator - Sanders**

In an attempt to welcome all voices, Ms. Wright assigned the role of facilitator to all members of the team. Initially, this was a subliminal cry for help; now it is the very foundation of what makes their PLT meetings the epitome of collective leadership.



## Collective leadership today

Today the fifth grade team meetings serve as a model for other grade levels. This team is even leading professional development sessions for their colleagues and sharing their journey. Other teams are using them as a blueprint for restructuring PLTs. The goal is not to duplicate their product, but their process: exploring all options, navigating through challenges, and discovering new pathways.

Recent CLI efficacy data indicates collective leadership is moving both student learning and PLT collaboration forward in meaningful ways. Ninety percent of teachers now consider themselves to be leaders beyond the classroom. And responses to, “If I try really hard, I can make progress with even the most unmotivated students” rank among the highest of all CLI schools across cohorts.

And we’ll all continue to lead the way, beginning with the **E.N.D.** in mind. Collectively.

**Months later, the plan is still in place. Roles are fluid and agendas change weekly. What remains constant is that everyone contributes, and everyone leaves with something valuable.**

*This story is published as part of a recent storytelling retreat hosted by the [Office of Educator Effectiveness and Leadership Development \(OEELD\)](#) within the [South Carolina Department of Education](#). The [Center for Teaching Quality](#), an OEELD partner, facilitated the retreat and provided editorial and publication support. Learn more about this work and read additional stories by following [@EducationSC](#) and [@teachingquality](#).*



As an educator for more than 20 years, Dr. Cassandra S. Bosier beams with POLO-PRIDE as the current principal of Polo Road Elementary School. Her passion for serving others in the area of instructional leadership is infectious. She utilizes her uncompromising drive to learn new things, pose reflective questions, and empower others who labor alongside her in the educational field. In spite of the challenges and because of the successes, Dr. Bosier continues to look forward to coming to work each day with the expectation of exploring all options and discovering new pathways for all students, staff members, and families.



A two-time graduate of the University of South Carolina, National Board Certified Ms. Brittany Daniels has served students for 16 years. After teaching elementary school for ten years, Ms. Daniels followed her passion for developing thinkers and lovers of literacy by becoming a school-based Literacy Coach. Ms. Daniels is a contributing author for The Daily Cafe’s Tip of the Week, an online publication sent worldwide. Ms. Daniels is POLO-PROUD to call Polo Road Elementary School home and the teachers and students she serves “literacy family.” Outside of her professional role, you can find her with a journal in hand and serving as a proud mom to her daughter Rhyann and fur baby Chadwick.