



Philadelphia Academy of School Leaders

Case Study: Alexander K. McClure School

School Overview

Background

Alexander K. McClure (McClure) School serves students in Grades Pre-K – 5th grade in the Hunting Park section of North Philadelphia. McClure represents a diverse population of students, all of whom are from the Hunting Park Neighborhood. The neighborhood is best known for its park, eponymously named “Hunting Park,” which was once home to William Penn's secretary, James Logan. Today, the community celebrates the diversity and heritage of its residents, the most of whom are Hispanic/Latino and African American residents. Like some other Philadelphian neighborhoods, Hunting Park has seen a local increase in drug abuse and crime over the last few years, but organizations like the Friends of Hunting Park, Hunting Park United, and Esperanza, a faith-based community development cooperation, have helped to deter criminal activities in partnership with the local 25th Philadelphia Police District.

Sharon Marino, the principal, will be entering her sixth year as principal of McClure next year. Before becoming principal, she was a kindergarten teacher, both at McClure and another North Philly School, Jay Cook. As Sharon transitioned into the principal role, she prioritized outside partnerships, and continues to do, as her goal is to make McClure a community school.

To determine where case studies would be conducted, we reviewed standardized test scores, pre- and post- staff survey data from the fellowship year, and student attendance data. Though PSSA scores at McClure have not increased, average staff ratings on the UChicago Leadership and Entrepreneurial Leadership questions did increase, with 10% and 7% more teachers agreeing or strongly agreeing that Sharon exhibited qualities of a strong and entrepreneurial leader. Further, average daily attendance rates have remained between 92-95% at McClure over the past several years and McClure is leading its network, Neighborhood Network 4, in decreasing the number of chronically absent students. In 2015-2016, McClure reduced the number of chronically absent students by 7 percent, and more than three-fourths of McClure students attended 90 percent of the school year.¹

Demographics	
Hispanic/Latino	63%
Black/African American	27%
Multi-Racial/Other	6%
White	3%
Asian	1%
Economically Disadvantaged	100%
English Language Learners	16%
Special Education (IEP)	7%

Survey	UChicago Leadership	Entrepreneurial Leadership
2016	81%	86%
2017*	91%	93%
Change	+ 10%	+ 7%

Attendance & Achievement	Average Daily Attendance (ADL)	% Proficient or Advanced (ELA)	% Proficient or Advanced (Math)
2015	94%	24%	7%
2016	95%	19%	5%
2017*	92%	18%	4%

* Fellowship Year (Cohort 2)

¹ https://www.naesp.org/sites/default/files/Matheny_MJ17.pdf

However, Sharon continued to seek additional resources to bolster attendance efforts at McClure. For 2016-2017, McClure successfully secured a team from and won a Teacher-Leader Collaborative Grant, which has provided funding for attendance initiatives such as mentoring and parent meetings.

Also, McClure is one of six schools chosen by the District to partner with the Free Library of Philadelphia to implement the Read By 4th Attendance Ambassador program. Ambassadors are expected to educate parents and families of the importance of attendance and maintain communication as the year progresses. Sharon's relentless approach to attendance and securing resources for her school community makes McClure a clear choice for a Cohort 2 case study.

Fellowship Experience

Sharon's views of the Fellowship are very positive. According to her reflections, the Fellowship has been instrumental in building her own confidence as a leader, helping her change collaborative structures, and supporting her to implement a coaching and feedback cycle at McClure with fidelity. She has created leadership opportunities for staff based on best practices for retaining irreplaceable teachers' specifically, a "grade team leader" position has been created in each grade level at McClure. As a result of the Fellowship, Sharon also feels empowered to share her learnings with others. Along with a select group of other Fellows, Sharon has been asked by the Neubauer foundation to engage in conversations with the School District of Philadelphia around how to improve District professional development practices.

She also feels strongly that she is more connected to her peers across the city as a result of the Fellowship, noting that she now regularly engages with other school leaders that she'd previously never met.

"Cohort 4 was recently notified of their acceptance, and I have people texting me, like, 'I'm in, I'm in!' There's definitely this excitement about being a Fellow and what the Fellowship can do."

– Sharon Marino

Executive Summary

Impact on Leader Practices

- ✔ **Sharon feels empowered to lead McClure with more confidence as a result of the Fellowship.** Not only is Sharon more confident in her decision-making, she also feels that she not only knows what McClure needs, but she also knows how to provide it.
- ✔ **The Fellowship consistently and intentionally provided Sharon with actionable next steps that helped her effectively and efficiently implement new initiatives at McClure.** Actionable next steps have helped Sharon to more thoughtfully consider systems and structures at McClure and alter them to ensure they positively impact her school community.
- ✔ **As a result of her development, Sharon has been able to think through new ways of sharing leadership at McClure.** Sharon has focused on creating leadership opportunities for more teachers, largely by appointing grade team leaders.

Impact on Schools

- ✔ **McClure's overall climate has improved as teachers increasingly take on leadership roles and take more responsibility for managing classroom climate.** Sharon has prioritized creating leadership opportunities for teachers and has pushed teachers to forge strong relationships with parents. Climate has improved as a result.
- ✔ **McClure has seen significant declines in both the percentages of students chronically absent and chronically tardy.** Sharon instituted attendance celebrations and calls home for unexcused absences, and also worked to bring an attendance program to McClure. McClure now has the lowest percentage of chronically absent students in its learning network.
- ✔ **Sharon sees "pockets of growth" as strong indicators that efforts are beginning to gain traction and lead to bigger improvements.** Literacy data in kindergarten and first grade has been strong and there has also been significant growth in math in the lowest-performing group of students. Both indicate that interventions are taking meaningful effect.

Implications

- ✔ **Continue to prioritize sessions on retaining irreplaceable teachers and building effective teams through coaching and development.** Development in these areas has served Sharon, and McClure by extension, very well and should be sustained.
- ✔ **Consider how best to provide Fellows with ongoing support with vision-setting.** Different stakeholder ideas about McClure's vision may indicate more, ongoing support is needed in this area.
- ✔ **Consider how to best to support Fellows with ongoing support in distributing leadership.** Efforts to distribute leadership are promising, but more on-going support is needed, especially since several leadership roles were created as a result of grant support.

Impact On Leadership Practices

Overall Leadership Approach

According to multiple groups of stakeholders, the Fellowship has had a positive influence on Sharon’s overall leadership practice. Sharon feels that she is a more confident leader as a result of the Fellowship, and others have noted that Sharon has “raised the bar” for her staff, in terms of expecting teachers to take more responsibility as leaders in the school. Additionally, the Fellowship has helped Sharon re-think systems and structures at McClure to ensure they are best serving students and has consistently provided her with actionable next steps to help her most efficiently make desired changes at her school.

- ✔ **Sharon feels empowered to lead McClure with more confidence as a result of the Fellowship.** Not only is Sharon more confident in her decision-making, she also feels that she knows what McClure needs and how to provide it. The Fellowship consistently provided Sharon with high-quality professional development in several key areas, such as creating leadership opportunities for irreplaceable teachers and implementing a coaching cycle.

- ✔ **The Fellowship consistently and intentionally provided Sharon with actionable next steps that helped her effectively and efficiently implement new initiatives at McClure.**

Comparing the Fellowship to Relay, a leadership program Sharon has done previously, she felt that the Fellowship has helped her understand both the “why” and the “how,” whereas Relay only gave her the “what.” The actionable next steps that the Fellowship intentionally and consistently provided, like identifying lists of irreplaceable teachers and creating action plans to ensure they remain at McClure, have helped Sharon more thoughtfully consider the systems and structures that undergird McClure and alter them to ensure they positively impact her school community.

“It’s helped me think through things in a very systematic way, but the output is not creating a whole new system per se, it’s how you think through your structures, and your organizational leadership and your instructional leadership, too.”

– Sharon Marino

- ✔ **As a result of her development, Sharon has been able about the think through new ways of sharing leadership at McClure.** In the year that has passed since Sharon completed her Fellowship, she has focused on creating leadership opportunities for more teachers, most prominently by implementing grade team leaders. However, not all teachers feel that these opportunities are available to them. This may be related to the K-3 focus of the grant-funded Teach Plus program, which Sharon has been using to develop grade team leaders in grades K-3.

Fellowship Strands

This section describes how the Fellowship influenced Sharon’s practices in vision-setting processes, team-building, and entrepreneurial leadership.

- ✔ **Vision-Setting: All stakeholders are clear on Sharon’s priorities for the year but are not necessarily clear on an overarching vision for McClure.** Sharon consistently communicates her priorities to staff and parents, who demonstrated a solid understanding of Sharon’s main priorities for the year, such as student attendance, implementing a coaching cycle, and introducing more leadership opportunities for teachers. However, the vision of McClure as a community school was not consistently stated. Parents shared that they see McClure as a place where students are the top priority, and teachers felt that the McClure vision was focused on providing best education experience for students, paying special attention to the context of the local community. The leadership team did echo the community school sentiment first expressed by Sharon, also noting that leaders shared that the vision for the school “changes often” based on the needs of the community.

- ✔ **Team-Building: Sharon restructured the way that teachers are coached and receive feedback as a result of the Fellowship.** Since her first year as principal in 2013, Sharon has worked hard to implement a culture of feedback at McClure. In the beginning, she faced some pushback from a few veteran teachers, who had contributed to a culture she described as “clique-y and competitive.” She normalized frequent informal observations and worked with teachers to incorporate best practices, later training two experienced teachers to serve as coaches. However, she wasn’t as successful as she would have liked to be, likely because she lacked the time she would have wanted to devote to develop these teachers as coaches. One of Sharon’s top priority coming out of the Fellowship was to implement a coaching cycle structured around

regular observations and debriefs, during which coaches give direct and actionable feedback to teachers. Additionally, Sharon hired an Assistant Principal at the end of the

2016-2017 school year, whose role is largely focused on managing coaching and professional development efforts overall. McClure is now much more intentional about coaching, having assigned each teacher, no matter how many years of experience, a coach. Teachers and leaders speak very highly of the implementation of the new coaching cycle, noting that previously, “[coaching] didn’t really happen, because it wasn’t really planned. Now, it’s second nature.”

“For us to be getting into classrooms and conferencing with teachers so consistently... that’s definitely been a change. I really think we are keeping to the coaching cycle with more fidelity this year than last year.”

– Leadership Team Member

- ✔ **Entrepreneurial Leadership: Sharon has always been relentless about seeking out new resources, in the form of programs, partnerships, and initiatives, to bring to the McClure community.** When Sharon entered her first year as principal, there was only the

Einstein Nutrition program.

Now, there are more than 20 partnerships and programs at McClure. Specifically, City Year, the Villanova Mentoring Program, Playworks, and Read by 4th are highly influential and were all chosen because they

are aligned to various goals. For example, the focus on attendance is bolstered by attendance ambassadors from the Read By 4th partnership. When asked about any new initiatives or partnerships, Sharon shared she had not focused as much on “new” initiatives as she had on ensuring all existing partnerships and programs continue to be meaningful.

“She does more for the community than anyone I know. Since she came, she motivated the kids and brought more energy, and way more programs. Who the principal is makes a lot of difference.”

– McClure Parent

Impact On Schools

School Culture & Teacher Attrition and Retention

Multiple stakeholders noted that Sharon’s passion for and dedication to the McClure community do not go unnoticed, and that she looks for these same characteristics when making hiring decisions. Leaders also noted that they have seen teachers taking more responsibility and attributed this to Sharon’s attempts to create more leadership opportunities for teachers and cultivate teachers and leaders overall.

- ✔ **When making hiring decisions, Sharon focuses on potential new teachers’ ability to commit to McClure for the long-term.** In conversations about Sharon’s priorities when thinking about hiring new teachers/staff, all stakeholders mentioned dedication and commitment to the McClure

community. Sharon clearly values these traits above all, noting that in recognizing “who we are, where we are, what our families need,” she will not leave McClure until she has built a core group of teachers that will keep the school functioning at the same level without her.

“One of the biggest things I’ve noticed with Sharon and other teachers here is how passionate they are about being here. They want to be here, stay here and be the absolute best they can be for students. I think that is McClure. That’s number one. The dedication to students and the community.”

– Leadership Team Member

- ✔ **McClure’s overall climate has improved as teachers increasingly take on leadership roles and take more responsibility for managing classroom climate.** In thinking about the most influential parts of the Fellowship on her leadership practice, Sharon noted that the actions related to retaining irreplaceable teachers are at the top of the list. Specifically, Sharon has prioritized creating leadership opportunities for teachers in each grade level, seeking and responding to feedback via surveys, and generally pushing teachers to take ownership of their own classroom climate by forging strong relationships with parents. Leaders noted that they’ve seen an increase in teachers taking ownership for climate in their own classrooms by reaching out to parents more often and feel that this may be connected to climate improvements on a larger level. Teachers are clearly beginning to understand the importance of parent involvement as a precursor to progress with regard to classroom climate and have started to act accordingly.

“Something Sharon wanted to do this year was push a lot of responsibility onto teachers and school-based teacher leaders.”

– Leadership Team Member

“Overall, our climate has definitely improved. A huge shift I’ve seen this year is with teachers reaching out to parents themselves. They’re really taking ownership for the climate in their classrooms, which we’ve been trying to get them to do for years.”

– Leadership Team Member

- ✔ **Sharon’s efforts to recognize and retain high-quality teachers have been successful.**

Though some turnover continues to occur at McClure, Sharon notes that this turnover could be described as “good turnover”, in that most teachers who weren’t truly dedicated to the school community have decided to go elsewhere, making room for new hires with the qualities Sharon seeks. However, all but one of the teachers that Sharon identified as “irreplaceable” returned in 2017.

*According to the Spring 2017 Talent Update, **9 out of 10** teachers identified as “irreplaceable” returned to McClure in Fall 2017.*

Impact on Student Achievement

Though PSSA scores have not changed significantly over the past few years, multiple stakeholders have described “pockets of growth” in student performance. Additionally, McClure is a network leader in student attendance improvement and has been recognized for decreasing the number of chronically truant and absent students.

- ✔ **Sharon sees “pockets of growth” in student achievement as strong indicators that efforts are beginning to gain traction and lead to bigger improvements.** With the caveat that higher achievement is the end goal overall, Sharon noted that McClure is primarily focused on growth. Given that many students are performing behind grade level coming in, McClure is focused not so much on standardized scores, but on growth on other measures, such as Lexia and AimsWeb. Sharon has seen “really strong pockets of growth”, particularly in first grade, where McClure has had consistency with staff. AimsWeb literacy data has been strong, and they have also had significant growth in math in the lowest-performing group of students, indicating that interventions may be starting to have a meaningful effect. The 2016-2017 School Progress Report supports this finding: McClure’s Average Growth Index (AGI) for the Lowest-Performing 20% of Students in PSSA Mathematics was high enough to reach the “Model” Tier, highest of the SPR tiers. Overall, McClure is seeing decreases in the number of students reading below grade level and increases in students above grade level, which are trends that Sharon gladly celebrates. Parents have noted that the presence of City Year has really made a difference, especially for the upper grades. City Year partners with teachers to work with small groups of students, which gives students opportunities to go over what they learn in class and practice skills with more individualized attention.
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- “The City Year groups have been really good for my daughter. They really cater the groups to students’ needs. Overall, more adults in the classrooms helps students get the help they need.*
- Parent
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- ✔ **McClure has seen significant declines in both the percentages of students chronically absent and chronically tardy.** During her Cohort Year and over the last year, student attendance has been a major priority for Sharon. As a result of the Fellowship, Sharon instituted attendance celebrations, calls home for unexcused absences, and worked to bring the Read By 4th Attendance Ambassador program to McClure. Now leading the Learning Network with the lowest percentages of chronically absent students, McClure continues to reduce the number of students who are chronically absent or late by educating parents about the importance of maximizing instructional time. As a result of this success, Sharon was asked to appear at the 2017 Fall Institute to be a guest facilitator for a session on chronic absenteeism.

Contributing Factors & Implications

Contributing Factors

A few factors contribute to the findings discussed above. At the beginning of this year, Sharon was awarded a grant through Teach Plus, and has used the support primarily to train teachers in grades K-3 to lead grade groups. Without this financial support, it is unclear whether this would have occurred. Additionally, Sharon's commitment to McClure is extremely strong, and early attempts to distribute leadership are promising. However, there is no clear evidence that McClure's positive trajectory would continue if Sharon were to transition out of her role.

✔ **The Teach Plus grant has been instrumental in creating leadership opportunities for teachers in grades K-3.**

At the beginning of this year, Sharon was awarded a grant through Teach Plus, which is focused on creating leadership opportunities for teachers within their grade levels. At McClure, the grant has been structured to support Sharon's efforts to retain irreplaceable teachers.

"Teach Plus is a big deal for us. We're one of five schools to be selected by William Penn to launch it. It's because we believe in the future teacher leaders and their ability to lead change."

The grant offers teachers the opportunity to be coached around leading

- Sharon Marino

their peers in grade team meetings and working collaboratively to meet students' needs more effectively.

- ✔ **Without the financial support offered by the Teach Plus Grant, it is unclear whether as many leadership opportunities would exist for staff.** Sharon's early attempts to distribute leadership are promising. Through the Teach Plus grant, she has created opportunities for teachers in grades K-3 to step into leadership roles as grade team leaders. The grant also provides support in the form of professional development for newly-appointed grade team leaders. However, there is no clear evidence that these roles would have been created if not for the Teach Plus grant. In grades 4 and 5, which are not included in the Teach Plus grant, members of the McClure leadership team are still leading grade team meetings.

Implications

This case study demonstrates the impact the Neubauer Fellowship can have on individual principals and their schools. Based on these findings, *School Leaders* will want to consider how to reinforce – and sustain – improvements in principal practice over time. Below are several implications and potential recommendations.

- ✔ **Continue to prioritize sessions on retaining irreplaceable teachers and building effective teams through coaching and development.** Sharon internalized much of the development related to the importance of distributive leadership and meaningful school-based development. In conversations with stakeholders, we heard about Sharon’s increased focus on implementing a new coaching cycle and creating leadership opportunities for teachers and how these efforts have been largely successful. *School Leaders* should continue to provide training on in these areas to potentially see similar effects in other Fellows’ schools.
- ✔ **Consider how best to provide Fellows with ongoing support with vision-setting.** Stakeholders’ ideas about the McClure vision were not in sync. As noted above, Sharon’s and the leadership team’s ideas about the vision differed from that of teachers and parents; the former group felt that vision for McClure was based in creating a community school that would provide resources from students and their families, while the latter group felt that the vision was to meet the needs of the whole child and prepare students to be global citizens. Though Sharon’s priorities are consistently made clear to staff and parents, ideas about the over-arching vision vary widely. These differing conceptions about the vision for McClure may indicate that another attempt at collectively creating a new may be useful moving forward. *School Leaders* should consider how to best provide ongoing training on the importance of a vision statement to ensure follow through on implementation.
- ✔ **Consider how to best to support Fellows with ongoing support in distributing leadership.** As referenced above, Sharon’s early efforts to distribute leadership are promising, in that she has created leadership opportunities for teachers, has implemented a new coaching and feedback cycle with fidelity, and has involved parent volunteers into the school community seamlessly. However, there is no clear evidence that as many leadership roles would exist if not for the Teach Plus grant, and there is no clear evidence that McClure’s positive trajectory would continue if Sharon were not present. Stakeholders clearly view Sharon as a major factor in McClure’s success, but it is unclear whether collective confidence extends to the leadership team and teaching staff. *School Leaders* should provide ongoing training related to gradual release of responsibility for highly effective and invested leaders, such as Sharon, who are working on creating leadership opportunities for staff but are clearly still the most critical element of a school’s potential success. Further, since Teach Plus has been so impactful at McClure, *School Leaders* may want to consider offering something similar internally.