

Advancing Principals

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Driving Improvement in Kentucky

Focus on Coaching: Jason Radford

As a National School Leadership Coach (NSLC) as part of NISL’s Advanced Credentialing System project, I have had the privilege to work with several principals and support their journey towards continuous improvement. My involvement with the project began in the summer of 2016, when I, alongside a number of other educators in Kentucky, Pennsylvania and Mississippi, went through a rigorous selection process to become credentialed to coach school leaders. I have been working with my coachees for the past year and a half, supporting them as they think more systemically about how to improve student achievement. Over the course of our work together, I have seen them incorporate NISL’s systematic approach for school design into their everyday thinking and decision making and set clear goals for their staff and their students.

Recently, in my coaching visits, I asked my coachees to reflect on their experience so far. I inquired about their thinking and work towards reaching their vision for the Action Learning Project (ALP), a project that each coachee undertakes to conduct action research in their buildings to foster school improvement. Through this conversation, one principal, David Nole, from Henry Moss Middle School in Bowling Green, shared several thoughts about how his approach to his work has changed: “The NISL Wheel is now the tool I refer to most regularly,” David said. “The wheel provides the outline I use to be more strategic in what I want to achieve. It supports my work in aligning processes to ensure I effectively monitor what we are doing well, and what needs to be improved. Coaching has been essential for implementing the information from NISL. My coach is available at all times to go over questions, celebrate successes, and to guide me through the processes I feel I need to implement or improve strategically.”

Some 500 students who speak more than 30 languages attend Henry Moss, and a large percentage are English language learners. The school has historically been classified as low-performing and many students arrive at the middle school below grade level in reading. What’s more, there has been high staff turnover in English Language Arts, putting downward pressure on student learning.

Over the past year, David worked extensively with his administrative and teacher leadership teams to accurately diagnose and address the root causes of the academic issues in ELA at Henry Moss. Drawing on the NISL framework for strategic thinking, David has redesigned how he conducts faculty meetings, leveraging them as opportunities to build a system of continuous learning based upon the needs of his school and staff. He and his staff have used the ALP reflection tool to deeply reflect on and remove barriers.

David and his team zeroed in on High Quality Teachers & Teaching, one of the three main subsystems identified by the NISL Wheel, along with the sub-element of Continuous Improvement, to support their efforts with school improvement. We recently conducted a mini-inquiry with his identified teachers for the ALP in order to analyze what was happening in their classrooms and how what we saw related or did not relate to his overarching goals. During the debrief on the evidence collected, we referenced the NISL Wheel consistently to see what the best teachers in the best systems do to support next steps.

In addition, he has dived into research on learning theory and used it with his administrative team in order to facilitate their own professional growth, build capacity within them, and strategically support the implementation of this work in his school. On a recent coaching visit, he pulled out the [NCEE report *Beyond PD*](#) and told me about how he and his team has used it as a resource to adapt lessons from how British Columbia, Canada structures professional learning to his school's unique context.

And the early returns are promising: the school is seeing growth in their benchmark assessments for reading and David's administrative team has also noticed a difference in the principal's approach. His assistant principal shared her thoughts about the work they have done thus far and the impact it has had. She said, "throughout this experience, David has consistently returned to school with ideas and resources to share and to help refine our processes within our building. His work with his coach branched out to our entire administrative team, setting the stage for school improvement. The processes we have implemented have been highly beneficial throughout this 2017-2018 school year. Mr. Nole's NISL coach has been an advocate for our processes, collaborating to help us as we strive for improvement."

David has been exemplary in his commitment to his ALP, the NISL strategic framework and our work together as coach and coachee. He has been reflective, honest and open as we asked the tough questions and worked together to develop answers to them as true thought partners. It is exciting to see the school take a systems approach, utilizing the research behind how people learn, and using the global benchmarking that NISL has provided. As a coach, it is especially gratifying to support the ALP work to help address school priorities, and in so doing strategically support improvement and build capacity in others.