

Advancing Principals

March 01, 2018



Keeping Pace with Changes

In the Education World Through NISL

Leadership in Action: Lynnette McNeil

A seasoned veteran, Lynnette McNeil is in her 20th year in education and 10th year as an administrator. She was a middle school and high school language arts teacher, worked in curriculum development and was an assistant principal for five years before becoming principal of Oakdale Elementary School in Brandon, Mississippi, a position she has held for five years. Her school is home to 630 students and is one of five elementary schools in the Northwest Rankin community, part of the Rankin County School District.

Although McNeil enrolled in the National Institute for School Leadership's (NISL) Executive Development Program (EDP) later in her career, completing it just last year, she said the opportunity could not have come at a better time for her. "Our socioeconomics have changed a little, the testing has changed, the standards have changed. NISL was very helpful and timely for me in learning how to tackle some of these changes effectively."

One such change McNeil, along with the Oakdale Elementary parent and teacher community, has been forced to wrestle with was the increase in state-mandated testing. "We're tested so much now as opposed to how we were years ago. I think it's easy for teachers *and* kids to get burned out. We really have to be mindful about how we approach instruction to get the results that we want with our kids."

McNeil's Action Learning Project, which she completed as a core component of the EDP, focused on [Teacher Lesson Study](#)—a practice she gained special insight into from NISL's [Center on International Education Benchmarking](#)-informed curriculum that translates lessons from such practices of the world's high-performing education systems. She worked with a group of English Language Arts fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade teachers on how they approached designing lessons and their collaboration with one another around that design process.

When describing the project, McNeil gave an example of a time when a first-year teacher volunteered to teach a lesson that her lesson study group had planned together. Following the lesson, the group

sat down to discuss how the lesson went, what the students were doing during the lesson, what learning looked like in the classroom, and how the group could improve upon the lesson to achieve what they wanted to see with respect to student learning.

“The way the conversation evolved was incredible,” McNeil said.

She said the way in which the teachers observed the first-year teacher giving the lesson was eye opening. Rather than seeing their own responsibility for any shortcomings in the lesson, they critiqued what the first-year teacher could have done better. She recognized that she needed to lead a mindset shift around collaborative lesson planning and the shared observation process that would inform it.

“I told them no, you all have to do this together. You all share the responsibility for this lesson you designed and she’s going to go back and teach it again. She’s just going to be teaching what you all together are designing.”

What’s more, McNeil saw that her educator community at Oakdale Elementary had not been given the support and guidance to work as a team at the level they needed to in order to improve lessons and student achievement.

As she put it, “We were really congenial, everyone got along well, but were we collegial like we needed to be?”

Through the EDP, McNeil was able to hone her skills and refine areas of her leadership that she saw needed improvement by drawing on the curriculum and the expertise of the wider NISL community. “It’s not just me. One thing that really came out of my experience in the EDP was my leadership team and really using them to guide what we do.”

Overall, McNeil sees the impact of her Lesson Study ALP as being twofold. First, it transformed how teachers structured a lesson and made room for creativity.

“It’s not just that they’re trying to cover material or push information on kids, it’s that we’re really wanting them to internalize the content and make that learning come alive,” she said.

Second, students at Oakdale Elementary became visibly more engaged and gained a clearer understanding of the content that was presented to them as a result of the more effective collaboration around lesson planning and improvement.

Today, the creativity, collaboration and sharing of ideas among teachers at Oakdale Elementary continues and has expanded to more departments. Math teachers in third through sixth grade are now working through different standards they have had difficulty with in the past, referencing the approaches used by the English Language Arts teachers who piloted the effort in their own collaborative conversations.

Moving forward, McNeil's focus is on the rigor of instruction at her school: making sure students are receiving rigorous, relevant instruction in the classroom, and empowering them to think at a higher level.

"A big point with the EDP and NISL is really taking our schools to the next level and competing on a global scale," she said. "That's really something we want to be able to do. We want to provide opportunities for students to be the recipients of high-quality teaching and a great education."

Although she has completed the EDP, Lynnette McNeil is not without support or resources in working to achieve her future goals and the goals of Oakdale Elementary. With her network from the EDP and now working alongside her NISL Distinguished Principal coach, McNeil said "It has been really helpful to see and talk with people from other schools, to see what learning looks like not only in the states but also applying the learning from all the NISL readings and research from the national level and from the global level."