

# Advancing Principals

December 15, 2017



## Raising Professional Learning Communities to the Next Level

### Leadership in Action: John Ellison

In rural Chickasaw County, Mississippi, the Houston School District serves both the town of Houston and a village by the name of Woodland. Their combined population sits somewhere just north of 3,600 residents. One resident in particular has worn several hats in the Houston School District. His name is John Ellison.

John Ellison taught ninth-grade math for 10 years at Houston Middle School where he also served as the school's baseball coach, basketball coach, and even bus driver. He eventually was named principal of the district's upper elementary school and, after four years, returned to Houston Middle School where he's now in his second year as school principal.

In a recent interview with NISL, Ellison's commitment to and passion for his school and students was obvious. So too was his commitment to reflection on his practice and personal growth. His experience with NISL, he said, has helped strengthen that commitment.

In the summer of 2016, Ellison enrolled in NISL's [Executive Development Program](#) (EDP), which has been proven to strengthen instructional leadership and raise student achievement across schools, districts and states. As part of the program, participants work to complete an Action Learning Project (ALP) as a way to implement the EDP's principles and concepts in their respective schools and districts. Ellison's enrollment was made possible by a federally-funded Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grant, which allowed principals in participating districts across three participating states to participate in an evaluation of the EDP.

Ellison's ALP has been focused on creating Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) where teachers and school leaders come together to share and analyze data, collaborate on best practices, track student progress, and participate in ongoing professional development.

He's not creating PLCs from scratch; a form of collaborative time for teachers existed at Houston Middle School prior to his return to the school. However, as Ellison said, they were "PLC-lite."

"We did it but I don't think we were doing it as deliberately and as strategically as we're trying to use our PLCs now," he explained. "You want it to be something that's beneficial to teachers. If we're using their time, we want it to be something worthwhile."

Ellison describes the process as a growing and incremental one. "We started off at the foundation level," he said. "Each week we learned, and we got better. Each time our EDP cohort met, I'd bring back ideas that I took into the PLC meetings to really raise those meetings to the next level. We looked at what other countries were doing, the [Nine Building Blocks \[for a World-Class Education System\]](#) and how I could apply those things to my own building."

One key takeaway for Ellison from the EDP was ensuring that he established a system in his building that would allow teachers to use data more meaningfully. Integral to the new PLCs at Houston Middle School is the use of student data and common assessments to drive each week's instruction. Ellison's goal is for the PLCs to "not just be a family meeting but an instructional meeting, a data meeting."

Although Ellison's ALP is in its early stages, he says his school is seeing results. In the past year, Houston Middle School has gone from a C rating in the Mississippi state accountability ratings up to a B rating.

"We saw student growth improve, we saw proficiency improve," Ellison proudly recounted.

He is also pleased with what he's seeing from the improved faculty collaboration and teamwork in the building.

"The overall effect in the whole building by working as a team and being a part of a PLC and that collaboration, to me, bled into everything," he said. "We went from a C to a B, but it also affected morale."

Beyond the academic growth of his students, John Ellison sees his role as one that should be focused on empowering his teams of teachers and fellow school leaders. When talking about parts of the EDP that resonated with him, Ellison pointed to "the emphasis on developing your committees, developing your teams to take on leadership roles. I think there's been a focus on empowering teachers to make teacher decisions; to give them the authority to do what they need to do in classrooms and then to be open enough and feel confident enough to share what they're doing."

In terms of personal goals going forward, Ellison said he has his sights set on becoming a NISL Distinguished Principal, a credential awarded by NISL's Advanced Credentialing System also made possible by the SEED grant, so that he can work to support his fellow school leaders in improving their practice, in his district and beyond.

“It interests me to be able to coach some other principals,” he said. “To take what we’ve learned, from mistakes we’ve made, and be able to pass that on. I’m interested in the give and take; when I’m coaching hopefully I’m helping them, but I’m also learning myself. The sharing of information and learning from each other is the part I think I’d enjoy the most.”

To read more about the Distinguished Principal credential and the coaching relationships that underpin it, see the other pieces in this edition of the NISL Advanced Credentialing System newsletter.