
Case Study: Atlanta Heights Charter School

Atlanta, GA | 93% Free and Reduced Lunch | 94% African-American | 5% Hispanic | 1% Other

Setting high expectations—and going beyond

When Melissa Jones Clarke arrived to the Georgia elementary school she was charged with turning around, she remembers saying: *"I don't know what was going on before me, but I think we've done a lot of pitying of children. From housing authorities or trailer parks, we've pitied, we've not taught,"* she says. *"It's 'Oh these babies.' No. These are scholars, and we're preparing them for Harvard or Howard or Spelman, Morehouse, Brown. Where do you want to go, and why, and how can I get you there?"*

It's that sort of "pig-headed optimism," as she calls it, that has driven her staff to excellence at all of the schools she has led, including Atlanta Heights Charter School in Georgia, for which Clarke earned the 2014 Ryan Award for transformational school leadership. During her tenure at Atlanta Heights, Clarke helped pull her students, who arrived years below grade level, up to new levels. Based on MAP/NWEA data for the 2013-14 school year, the school achieved an average growth rate of 170 percent for grades K-1 and 130 percent for grades 2-8. By her final year at Atlanta Heights, 91 percent of students were meeting state standards in reading. In 2014, she founded Willow Charter Academy in Lafayette, LA, importing the systems and structures that propelled Atlanta Heights to greatness.

"Any time we wanted to talk about school culture or how do you successfully open a new school in an urban environment, we visited Atlanta Heights Charter School to see the work that Melissa Jones Clarke was doing," says Tamika Draper, a Director

of School Quality for National Heritage Academies. She says Clarke creates a warm family environment that's evident upon entering the building and is able to motivate her staff through data. They want end results that will please "MJC," as they refer to her. When visiting her schools, Draper knows not to find Clarke in her office. *"I had to get a radio so I could locate her,"* she says. *"She's in classrooms. She knows the scholars by name. She's doing lunch duty. She's observing."*

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—Tamika Draper,
Director of School Quality,
National Heritage Academies

A college summer spent teaching English to 5th-graders in Africa hooked Clarke on teaching. *"That experience changed me,"* she says. After graduating from Ohio University with a bachelor's degree in elementary education, Clarke taught in Rockford and earned a master's degree in education leadership from National Louis University. She moved with her husband-to-be to Atlanta,

where she started teaching in a large school. She was impressed with how smoothly the principal handled things, so she asked to interview him about safety and security—*"all that stuff you don't learn from theory"* in education programs, she says. He started onboarding her. *"At the same time, I started getting this itch, like 'I can do this.'"*

District officials in Rockford called to inform her of open principal positions, emphasizing that they were seeking new and fresh ideas. At 27, newly married with a 6-month-old baby, she took over her first school as principal, and her inexperience showed, she says. *"I was haughty. I was the youngest on staff, the only person of color, and I*

was the boss. I had my Macy's suit and my Coach briefcase—no shoes to change into for the first day—but I was in charge," Clarke recalls. The associate superintendent considered her outfit and asked where her tennis shoes or flats were. *"I was like 'Oh, I'm a principal, I'm just going to be in my office'...and he's like, 'Right. The magic happens in these classrooms, and I expect you to be in these classrooms,'"* she says.

She had no assistant principal and later learned she was the fifth principal in three years to lead the school. *"I had to take that ego and throw that in the trash. I had to take that jacket off, throw on some flats and get to business,"* she says.

Her family later returned to Georgia, where she became an assistant principal before taking over a school where teachers had been found sleeping in their classrooms. Many staffers left through the transition, but she was able to bring in some "rock star" teachers, she says. The first year, the school outperformed seven of the nine nearby elementary

schools. The staff earned a governor's award for making the most gains.

Under Clarke's direction, the school continued to make gains, but she determined she wanted to work in an urban school in Atlanta. She was selected as founding principal of the Atlanta Heights Charter School operated by National Heritage Academies. *"I need to be where kids need me. I don't want to be somewhere where I'm just hanging out. Great! Everyone's on grade level. I want the child that's two, three, sometimes four years below grade level,"* she says.

The students coming in to Atlanta Heights were there: 91 percent of students in grades 2-5 were two to four years below grade level. Clarke's mother questioned why she would leave the school she'd worked so hard to turnaround to start anew at another school. *"I said 'if I don't, who will? Who will do it?' Because it's not easy, but it's possible,"* Clarke says.

CORNERSTONE I:

Transformational Leadership

Driver 1: Create and Sustain a Movement

Observables:

- Leader has a clear vision and specific goals for what success looks like and has identified clear strategies and a concrete plan to achieve success
- Leader creates buy-in among all stakeholders and motivates them to complete the mission
 - ▮ The staff believe in and are motivated by the vision and goals and are bought into the strategies and plan to achieve them
 - ▮ The students believe in and are motivated by the leader's vision and goals set for them and are bought into the aspirational and constructive environment expectations to support their achievement of the goals
 - ▮ The parents believe in the vision and goals and understand what follow through is expected of them in order to support their child's achievement of the goals
- Leader builds trust and loyalty among entire staff, operates with candor and transparency, and leverages his/her strengths and emotional intelligence to effectively execute the skills and capabilities of highly successful leaders

High Expectations for All

Winning over parents at her new school started with simple things—popsicles on a playground in July, a welcome-back cookout with bouncy houses in the parking lot. Clarke kept working at the relationships throughout the year, inviting families out, hosting coffees and pizza parties along with curriculum nights where she asked parents to share their stories about what led them to Atlanta Heights. She was sure to involve extended family members as well. *"If mom or dad are working, who's picking up the scholars? We want to know them, too,"* she says.

She set expectations for the parents as well as the students. *"We would always say we want families here, but make sure you're here to be part of the solution, not part of the problem,"* she says. *"We wouldn't tolerate disrespect. We were going to be kind through all exchanges."* Parents may not have had the best school experiences themselves, but

they want to be involved with their kids at school, if the activities are meaningful, she says.

At dismissal, Clarke had parents walk into the building to pick up their children, connecting them to teachers and what was going on in school. Some days, the staff passed out bottled water when it was hot, or cups of cocoa on a cold day. *"Small details take people a long way. You have to treat your folks right, and they will stay, and they will do the work for you,"* she says.

"The parents love her," says Tamika Draper, a Director of School Quality for National Heritage Academies. *"How do you get parents to love you right away? I don't know, but she has about 15 parents here daily, because she involves them with the process from day one."* It's not unusual to find Clarke out to dinner with parents, or staying involved with families in other ways, Draper says. *"Every leader doesn't do those things. It doesn't come in a book. It's not something you read. It's something you naturally have,"* she says.

Clarke has brought the same playbook to Willow and it's working, Draper says. One of the key tenets for her program at Willow is to maintain strong relationships with parents through purposeful and frequent communication home that includes attendance checks, newsletters, and teacher contact.

What It Looks Like

Even before she opened her new school, Willow Charter Academy, in a renovated Albertson's grocery store building, Clarke could envision what the school would look like. Students would walk on the right side of the hallways, moving through without talking, facing forward, walking with purpose. There would be hallway learning going on, with interventionists working with small groups in hallway nooks. *"Every moment matters,"* she says.

To build the movement amongst the staff, Clarke enlisted three high-performing teachers from her previous school to take on leadership roles. One would be a dean for K-2, one for 3-5, and one for intervention. *"I wanted to make sure they owned*

those cultural pieces," Clarke says. In the process, *"they grow teachers like them. I can close my eyes and know they've got it."*

She also makes sure to recognize her team for outstanding work. Every week, Clarke encourages staff to fill out reward slips that spotlight colleagues for exhibiting teamwork, dedication, or other positive qualities. The compliments are read aloud before the staff meeting. She organizes things such as a "Faculty Member of the Week" or a "Monday Motivator," bringing in breakfast sandwiches and leaving a quote in the staff lounge to motivate teachers. She also pulls together Halloween celebrations, crazy sweater days, or other team-building activities. *"You have to know your staff, and their favorite things. It comes down to building relationships,"* Clarke says.

She jumps in to teach also, leading her own small groups to work with lower-performing students. *"The heart of every leader is a teacher,"* Clarke says. *"The staff should view you as instructional leader, but not with too big of an ego that you can't sub in or do small groups. I love that time of my day, when I have a group that I serve."*

CORNERSTONE I:

Transformational Leadership

Driver 2: Create and Sustain Clarity

Observables:

- Leader creates clear strategies and develops a concrete plan to achieve the vision and goals with measurable objectives and benchmarks, strategies, tactics, timeline, and person(s) responsible
- Clear systems and protocols for measuring objectives exist and are used to benchmark progress, determine effectiveness strategies, and hold team accountable to execution of the plan
- Leader course corrects as necessary to ensure that the most effective plan and strategies are implemented and communicates rationale of course correction decisions to all stakeholders
- Ultimately, the leader communicates the plan and strategies and progress toward goals to all stakeholders, and holds the team accountable to execution of the plan and attainment of goals
- Leader effectively uses their time to focus on priorities and drive progress towards goals

Clear Priorities

The need at Atlanta Heights was overwhelming at first, Clarke says. *"The academics hit me in the face. Wow. I didn't know it was going to be this low,"* she says. In her attack plan, she set two goals: establishing a strong school culture and working toward academic excellence. *"If it didn't fit into one of those boxes, I didn't do it,"* she says. And that meant saying no to things or delegating them to others. Once, a health clinic partner that gave free physicals and immunizations to students offered to create a community garden at the school. *"I knew we could not take that on,"* she says. While it might have been great to tie the garden into initiatives such as the First Lady's healthy eating effort, Clarke also knew it didn't fit into one of those two boxes. She ultimately had a volunteer board member run it as an after-school venture that did not affect the focus of Clarke's leadership team.

Measure Progress

Clarke set clear benchmarks of where each class should be throughout the year to meet the staff's

overarching, year-end goals. The majority of students came in at the 15th-25th percentile, and Clarke aimed to get them to 60th percentile by winter, before pushing them up to 70th percentile on NWEA by the end of year. Those goals were broadcast on bright posters in every classroom. Faculty meetings began with good news, with group norms spelled out and staff members quizzing each other on accountability measures. *"It was in our talk, from our admissions rep to our PE teacher, everything came back to 'in two years, we need to be at X,'"* she says. She entrusted teacher leaders to go and spread the goals to the other grade-level teachers. And she also tried to make sure she pushed goals in a positive way. *"You have to have a presence, but not one of intimidation,"* Clarke says. Good leaders must be part of the process and help teachers own it, she adds. Clarke also relied on student and teacher attendance rates to help gauge progress.

It's Working

During Atlanta Heights' first year, the school ranked in the bottom 3 out of the charter network's 65

schools. *"I said, 'this is insane. I did not come here to fail. We've got to revamp.' We really dug into the data and turned it up,"* she says. By the winter of year two, out of an expanded group of the network's 71 schools, Atlanta Heights jumped to No. 34 for performance.

The leadership team worked to make all processes as transparent as possible, so staff members could plainly see how they could excel. At both Willow and Atlanta Heights, Clarke shared details early on about how everyone would be evaluated. The team dove into each category, providing specific examples of how a teacher could score high in each area. Letting teachers see as clearly as possible what good teaching looks like was a priority. Clarke appointed one instructional lead teacher per grade level and department, then did walkthroughs with them to make sure they were consistent in their observations.

Clarke focused on creating a culture where it was OK to have lessons videotaped, to focus on struggles, and to openly reflect on how to improve. She made sure teachers knew that *"you're going to mess up. But we're keeping a positive growth mindset. Expect that. That's ok. That keeps me honest, and holds us accountable,"* she says. Exit tickets, surveys, and focus groups also contributed to that accountability.

To keep everyone on mission throughout the year, Clarke used Sunday cyber calls to the parents and a weekly newsletter to teachers to communicate the urgency. To teachers, she would say: *"Get ready to roll on Monday morning, because somebody's baby is coming in here waiting for you to make it happen. You may be their best—period. And they're looking forward to seeing you, so make it intentional."*

CORNERSTONE I:

Transformational Leadership

Driver 3: Create and Sustain a High-Performing Team

Observables:

- Performance expectations and non-negotiables are clearly defined and staff strives to meet them while following established routines, procedures, and non-negotiables set forth by the leader
- Leader consistently communicates clear Fit/Performance expectations prior to and during hiring and throughout on-boarding and employment
- Leader fosters staff relationships that reflect a culture of candor, trust and respect, authentically recognizes accomplishments, and facilitates effective resolution of conflict among colleagues
- The leader's consistent, mission-aligned, decision-making anchors the staff and enrolls them in the leader's vision and strategies to achieve that vision
- Regular accountability processes are used by the leader to hold staff accountable to the performance evaluation rubric and results, and performance level is communicated directly and promptly by the leader

Looking for Magic

A teacher candidate's years of experience are not as important to Clarke as "magic is," she says. *"If you believe in kids, you can get on our bus,"* she says. A sense of urgency is also crucial; Clarke wants to see staff members *"teaching like your hair is on fire."*

When hiring, Clarke is also looking to make up for areas where she might need help. *"If I'm not a guru in science, which I'm not, I have to hire someone who can get it and explain it to me,"* she says.

Once she's assembled her team, she schedules an off-campus leadership retreat with her deans. Her aim is to create other leaders to help carry the vision. She also organizes retreats for grade-level teams.

Her first year, the staff was dominated by teachers who had less than two years' experience, and many had no experience working with the demographic. *"We quickly jumped into the book 'Mindset' by Carol Dweck,"* she says. And staff members set

goals for where they wanted to be at the end of each year of the five-year charter. At the end of the first year, only 41 percent of staff members stayed. *"We did some coaching out, as in: you should not be in front of children. Some moved around to other grade levels. Some said, 'I don't think this is for me,'"* she says. But during year two, Atlanta Heights started to record more success and retained 72 percent of the staff. In year three, the retention rate increased to 85 percent. *"We promoted teacher leaders I knew would grow people like them,"* she recalls.

Mandy Fueston, who worked with Clarke as the media specialist at Atlanta Heights, says Clarke has a knack for recognizing the strengths of her staff. *"It didn't matter whether you were a first-year teacher or teaching for five, six or seven years—if you had a strength, she wanted you to show it to help the other staff members grow. She believed in us teaching one another and helping other people and creating a family,"* Fueston says.

Fueston says Clarke did not micromanage her, so

she was able to focus on supporting teachers in the classroom. *"She let us teach to our students the way we needed to teach them,"* she says.

Michelle Olivier, a specialist on the intervention team at Willow, says Clarke's emphasis on relationships has resulted in a strong team. *"We found a group of people aligned with the culture. They agree with the philosophy that it's about academic growth,"* she says. *"I've been at schools where I didn't even know some teachers' names. I didn't know anything about the principal or assistant principal. I think when you build these relationships amongst staff first, and you have that to work with, that makes a difference because you're all vested in it."*

She has had to confront detractors who disagreed with her vision, especially one teacher who repeatedly told Clarke her expectations were too

high. *"Children do not rise to low expectations,"* Clarke says. At meetings, the woman would try to hijack the discussion. At first other teachers were scared of her, as she continued to try to rile up her colleagues. But others adopted Clarke's vision and rebutted the teacher's attempts. *"I'd tell them if you stand there and listen, you are just as responsible for that behavior as if you were saying it. Don't participate,"* she says. Eventually, the teacher left, and the remaining teachers grew in her absence.

When planning Willow Charter Academy, Clarke knew a distributed leadership model would be important as part of her structures. She wanted her three academic deans to serve as direct managers of teachers, providing ongoing coaching and instructional support. They also would help set the professional development agenda based on what they were seeing in the classrooms.

CORNERSTONE I:

Transformational Leadership

Driver 4: Create and Sustain an Aspirational and Constructive Learning Environment

Observables:

- Vision and goals are translated into sets of expected student behaviors and non-negotiables
- Staff communicate and clarify the culture goals and behavior expectations by providing rationale, practicing, and modeling with students
- Management policies, procedures, and response to disruptions are in place and utilized by all staff members to hold students accountable to high expectations
- Student motivation and investment are fostered through the use of college-bound symbols and stories to invest and motivate students in their own learning
- Inclusive and supportive learning community is created through symbols, ceremonies, and celebrations

Set the Right Tone

Clarke starts the day by playing upbeat music. The “connections” team (those teachers who are connected to every scholar in the building because they teach art, music, PE, library, etc.) are lined up on the curb. *“We’re valet-servicing, so we are opening car doors so we can greet that parent and that scholar,”* she says. Clarke is at the main door shaking hands and doling out her “good mornings.” Teachers follow the same routine at the classroom door, greeting the students by name, getting them started on the day by pointing to the ‘Do Now’ on the board. These routines start the day out pleasantly, and also provide a *“day-to-day reading of the parents and the staff,”* Clarke says.

“She is relentless about doing the things she feels are most important to make the education of our kids successful,” says Lybi Gittens, a director of school quality for National Heritage Academies. *“Melissa lays the path for her teachers to follow—she sets the direction for her school.”*

Even though Clarke laughs often with students and reveals an emotional side, there is no doubt about what her expectations are for her students and her staff, Gittens says. Clarke refers to her students as

scholars and makes them believe they are scholars. *“She is in their corner 100 percent,”* Gittens adds. Students are reminded about college regularly, and are part of a College Bound Scholars program developed by the network that helps graduating students identify and enroll in a high school that will prepare them for college.

Teacher Michelle Olivier says Clarke set the high level of expectations at Willow immediately, during the initial staff training. Her vision was reflected in the staff interactions and trickled down to students and parents. *“The students had high expectations coming in. They knew we have to line up this way and be at a level 0. It was consistent across the board, not just in Ms. So and So’s class. It was in every class,”* Olivier says. *“The custodial staff, everyone, held students up to the same expectations.”*

Clarke is also a principal who is not too busy to walk a young student to the nearby mall at the end of the day to meet a parent at work. Students react to that caring side. *“I don’t shake her hand like everybody else does,”* says student Raven Suire. *“I hug her every morning.”*

Why? *“Because she’s very special to me.”*

CORNERSTONE II:

Academic Accelerators: Systems and Structures

Driver 1: Implement Extended Day/Year Effectively

Observables:

- High-quality instructional time is greater than 190 days and approximately 8 hours a day
- Appropriate teacher and student schedules allow for a variety of opportunities for professional development, high-frequency coaching, data analysis, and small group instruction
- School-wide and classroom systems and procedures maximize instructional time, reduce transition time, and increase student academic engagement

At Atlanta Heights Charter School, the school year stretched 182 days, and the instructional day was longer than the traditional schools, Clarke says. Now at Willow, the school is in session 178 school days, while the surrounding schools run from 165 to 172 days. Willow's school day is longer too, by 1 hour and 45 minutes.

Clarke aims to extend learning time through her summer Titan Academy, which targets students who are below grade level. The academy offers a full-day program for kindergartners through

5th-graders. Serving almost 120 children, it runs for roughly a month during the summer. She ran a similar program at Atlanta Heights for students who would be taking the state assessment.

The weekly schedule includes time for common grade-level planning, professional development, and observation and feedback. It also makes space for students who need more individual attention to receive it through small-group pullout sessions held throughout the week.

CORNERSTONE II:

Academic Accelerators: Systems and Structures

Driver 2: Implement Robust and Frequent Assessment Capabilities

Observables:

- Valid and reliable interim and growth assessments that match Common Core/College Readiness Standards are determined for all grades and content—growth assessments are administered three times a year, and interim assessments are administered every 8-10 weeks
- Leadership fosters a data-driven culture through clear communication of the purpose and rationale of the data processes and through the act of regular assessment, analysis, and re-teaching
- Timely, leader- and teacher-owned processes are in place to assess, analyze, and act on interim assessment and growth data at the school-wide and individual student level
- A highly active leadership team reflects on the implementation of the data processes and manages accountability systems for assessment selection, administration, analysis, and action

Clarke constructed a solid assessment calendar. Her staff relies on NWEA MAP assessments that are administered in reading and math in the fall, winter, and spring. Students also take PARCC Performance Based Assessments in reading and math and PARCC End-of-Year Assessments in reading and math for grades 3-8. Students in grades 3-5 take the LEAP and iLEAP state assessment in science and social studies. In 8th grade, students take ACT Explore.

The staff also uses mock assessments aligned to the state test to gauge where students are prior to the exam. *“That’s so there wasn’t a huge gap when it came to the state assessment where children might be seeing extended response questions for the first time. No, they should see that ahead of time,”* Clarke says.

On a more daily basis, teachers incorporate exit tickets and are monitoring informal assessments

as well as their formative assessments. The staff adopted weekly common assessments and benchmark assessments. *“They are extremely purposeful and intentionally aligned with Common Core and curricular tools,”* Clarke says.

Clarke relies heavily on data collected from teacher observations as well as parent surveys and student feedback. *“It’s important to find out what’s in the voice of that child, what do they like best of that teacher?”* she says.

She says the continual collection and analysis of data helps put teachers in the right frame of mind to grow their students. *“If you do testing once a year, that’s a snapshot,”* Clarke says. *“But if you take more of a portfolio, it’s over time—you take away the fear.”*

CORNERSTONE II:

Academic Accelerators: Systems and Structures

Driver 3: Implement Small Group Instruction

Observables:

- Leader identifies the differentiation and small group instruction implementation expectations for staff
- Strong tracking of student assessment data (growth assessments, interim assessments, checks for understanding, exit slips, and unit assessments) exists and is used to inform instruction and develop individualized learning strategies and plans
- Protocols and procedures are in place to ensure that Response to Intervention (RtI) occurs and is regularly assessed
- Protocols and procedures are in place to ensure that Special Education services exist, meet the needs of students, and are regularly assessed
- Accountability processes are in place to ensure that differentiated and small group instruction occurs and effectively responds to student needs, accelerating achievement for all students

At Willow Charter Academy, Clarke has created an early academic intervention program, with a three-tier intervention model. Tier 1 provides differentiated instruction within the regular classroom; Tier 2 students receive additional support from intervention specialists during workshop time or at other times; and Tier 3 increases the intensity of support and narrows the focus. All teachers receive professional development on the Response to Intervention process.

As part of this intensive learning program, Tier 2 and 3 students receive small-group tutorials during the course of the school day. Generally, groups are no larger than five students, and run for 25-45 minutes in both reading and math, depending on a student's individual needs. Teachers are strategic about which classes they pull students from. *"Sometimes you missed art because you needed tutorial, but you never missed PE because you have to get the wiggles out,"* Clarke says.

The intensive learning team is comprised of a dean of intervention, four teachers and 9 paraprofessionals who are working toward becoming teachers. The intervention team teachers

also focus on those students in the "bubble group," who need an extra push into mastery or an advanced level. Michelle Olivier, a specialist on the intervention team, says the team members write lesson plans for these small-group sessions that include input from the classroom teachers. Students may be pulled out for multiple days of small-group instruction per week.

If a student is struggling with multiplication, and the class has to move onto the next concept to meet pacing guides, Oliver will take the student during art or another special and work in small groups to make sure he or she doesn't fall behind. Groups are adjusted as soon as data is returned. Students may test out, or be pulled into another group if they show a deficiency.

Clarke also tries to create opportunities for those struggling students to demonstrate their talents so their confidence level is not affected by being a Tier 2 or 3 student. *"I don't want to be told all day 'I'm low,'"* she explains. Through clubs and other special activities, Clarke aims to encourage those students. The staff holds data talks with students to detail where they need to be by the end of 8th grade to gain entrance into a high-performing high school.

CORNERSTONE II:

Academic Accelerators: Systems and Structures

Driver 4: Implement a Standards-Based Curriculum

Observables:

- The leader identifies Common Core/College-Readiness Standards and defines curriculum implementation expectations for staff
- Curriculum maps exist which outline which standards will be taught and when for each content area and/or grade level
 - Units and lessons are aligned to the maps ensuring that standards are taught in a methodical way
 - Clear lesson plans include components of effective lessons (e.g., instructional outcomes, lesson structure, instructional strategies, and assessments)
- Staff are held accountable for implementing the standards-based curriculum through regular reviews of lesson plans and implementation by the leadership team

The schools use the curriculum adopted by the National Heritage Academies network. It is Common Core aligned and a combination of staff-designed materials and off-the-shelf products. The staff uses Reading Street and Math Expressions for K-5. Middle school students use Big Ideas and Holt Math.

Pacing guides help teachers understand the expectations. For the first three weeks of teaching, Clarke has teachers use one type of lesson plan template. *“Once they master it, we go to this other format which is really user friendly, all the nuts and bolts, and includes the curricular tools they*

need to utilize,” she says. It prompts teachers to check off the standards covered by the lesson and outline areas to check for understanding to see which students may be struggling and need to be retaught tomorrow.

The leadership team reviews lesson plans on Thursdays and provides feedback before the weekend. That schedule is intentional to make sure teachers get a true break on the weekends and aren't working on lesson plans instead. At Willow, Clarke has two deans (one for K-2 and one for 3-5) to help her supervise lesson planning and curriculum training.

CORNERSTONE III:

Academic Accelerators: Developing “Black Belt” Teaching

Driver 1: Ensure Teacher Proficiency with Curricular Tools and Resources

Observables:

- Teachers can execute the fundamentals of the curricular tools and resources through practice
- Leadership supports teacher mastery of the curricular tools and resources through whole school and individual professional development, and monitors teacher mastery through evaluation and observation
- Having mastered the fundamentals of the curricular tools and resources, teachers expertly utilize a variety of curricular strategies to enhance and supplement the curriculum

As for helping teachers become experts with the curricular tools, Clarke says that she goes through the curriculum training sessions herself, or has her deans do so, so they can make themselves experts in it. They also keep an eye on teachers who may show proficiency with a certain curriculum, then rely on them to help train others. This method leads to teachers emerging as content leaders, she says.

Along with Clarke, grade-level deans and an instructional coach observe teachers weekly,

providing support and offering tips to teachers who need help with pieces of the curriculum. Teachers receive professional development from the leadership team that reflects the staff needs. The charter network also brings in consultants for trainings, and the staffs from other area schools are brought together throughout the year for combined professional development.

CORNERSTONE III:

Academic Accelerators: Developing “Black Belt” Teaching

Driver 2: Ensure Teacher Proficiency in Using Assessment Data to Individualize Instruction

Observables:

- Teachers use data trends from student growth and interim assessment data, check for understanding, exit slips, and unit assessments to develop individualized learning strategies and execute the fundamentals of differentiated and small group instruction
- Teachers communicate to students and parents the individual student’s current performance level (e.g., ACT, NWEA MAP, Lexile, Fountas and Pinnell level, or grade equivalency), current growth area, yearlong growth goals, and how to use the information
- Teachers utilize supplemental high-dosage tutoring to strategically support struggling and high-performing students from all subgroups
- Teachers expertly utilize a variety of technology and other programs (e.g., Accelerated Math) to strategically support struggling and high-performing students from all subgroups

Because of a testing cheating scandal in Atlanta, the staff had to correct some misimpressions parents and students had about students’ performance levels before entering Atlanta Heights. *“We had to help parents understand something’s not right here, that educational malpractice had occurred,”* Clarke says. *“I know he scored in exceeds on 4th grade last year, but he is reading at a pre-K level. Let me explain to you what that means.”*

As she did at Atlanta Heights, Clarke and her team at Willow do their best to keep families apprised of where the student stands academically so they can help the child improve.

To make sure teachers can use all the data available to them, Clarke incorporates regular data talks into the schedule. Part of teachers’ collaborative planning time is set aside for weekly data talks at each grade level. Teachers also drill into their data during weekly meetings with their instructional lead. New teachers participate in data talk simulations where other teachers model what should be happening during the meetings, which have an agenda and are scripted. The

meetings generally start with good news and a review of the items to be covered. The team then dives into a discussion of the results before moving into strategies to help individual students. Teachers usually share best practices for how they successfully moved kids in the past. *“They were here, now they’re here. How did you get them to move?”* Clarke says. *“At the same time, what didn’t work well?”*

A “Data Room” also helps center the staff on the importance of data collection and analysis. Organizational goals cover the walls, along with more granular data goals. Yes, numbers are a big part of what they do, but *“we have to move those numbers away and talk about what’s going on in the life of that child,”* Clarke adds. Sometimes that entails buying alarm clocks, toothpaste, or other things students need to get to school. *“Whatever excuses there were, we eliminated them,”* she says.

One wall shows results for every teacher, every grade level, and every student, in reading, math, social studies, and science. Those student names marked in red are three years below grade level according to NWEA results. Those in yellow are

two years behind, while green means students are on grade level, and blue indicates they are above.

"There's nothing to hide in that data room—for myself as the leader, the deans, the teachers," Clarke says. *"That grounds us."*

But she tries to help teachers become comfortable with the numbers, and remove focus on the idea that they would be used punitively. *"I say to them, 'I know it's scary, but we're holding hands as we walk through this together, and it will be rewarding at the end.'"*

CORNERSTONE III:

Academic Accelerators: Developing "Black Belt" Teaching

Driver 3: Implement Strategic Whole School Professional Development

Observables:

- Data trends from student growth and interim assessment data, high-frequency observations, evaluations, and staff surveys are used to inform the priorities of school-wide professional development
- A year-long professional development plan with a calendar exists which outlines the school-wide professional development goals, measurable objectives, quarterly benchmarks, and strategies to meet goals
- The Live the Learning model (i.e., airtight activities, high quality content, framing, group sharing, and reflection) is utilized to plan professional development
- Quality of the execution of professional development is measured through exit slips, surveys, and classroom observations, and the leadership team course corrects as necessary
- Leaders hold staff accountable to professional development objectives through a review of deliverables and focused observations

Each staff member attends an initial new teacher orientation for three days through the network. The staff also has 11 days of professional development built into the calendar. The leadership team plans the schedule of professional development in February for the upcoming school year. Clarke says the sessions must be effective. "I don't like to meet just to meet," she says. Every Monday after school from 3:45 to 5:15 p.m., the staff has time set aside for professional development. The professional development sessions may entail teachers on staff presenting on using smart boards

in more productive ways or an outside consultant introducing a new strategy. *"Those meetings don't last more than 30 minutes, unless I have someone coming into present,"* Clarke says. Staff members may break into smaller groups to work on more specific professional development goals with their dean. If the leadership team does not have a whole-staff professional development session scheduled, teachers may also use that time to prep.

CORNERSTONE III:

Academic Accelerators: Developing “Black Belt” Teaching

Driver 4: Implement Strategic High-Frequency Coaching

Observables:

- Data trends from student growth and interim assessment data, high-frequency observations, and teacher evaluations are used to determine staff performance levels and inform individual support plans
- Expectations are established for high frequency observation of all teaching staff (e.g., 20 minute weekly on average of 34 times per year)
- Leader prepares clear, effective, evidence-based feedback, and consistent feedback to teachers is provided through multiple normed meetings between teachers and leadership team members: 1:1 check-in, planning, observation feedback (15-30 min), and data analysis
- Teachers and leaders track progress on action steps and implementation of professional development objectives
- Leader holds staff accountable for the progress and results of high-frequency coaching and school-wide professional development objectives

Coaching

Teachers are observed weekly. They are matched with an instructional leader who will meet with them weekly to provide feedback. In those meetings, they review what went well and the areas that exist for improvement. When Clarke debriefs with the teachers she’s observing, she focuses the first 15 minutes on talking about life and the teacher, and the last 15 minutes on observations about the teacher’s lesson. *“I’m giving two pieces of affirming feedback for one piece of adjusting feedback,”* she says. Instructional leaders may pull in videotaped lessons on the iPad so the teachers can visualize how certain strategies can be used in the classroom. Clarke, her deans, and an instructional coach all focus on supporting teachers. In addition to the weekly observations, the instructional leaders make frequent informal visits to the classrooms.

A detailed observation form spells out what is expected of teachers in several categories: student and class relationships, classroom management, instructional delivery, instructional strategies,

feedback, and instructional planning. The form prompts coaches to keep objective notes throughout their observation and outlines what they should consider, such as whether expectations are being properly taught, reinforced, and enforced. Are instructional strategies based on data? Is feedback specific and timely?

For each category, the observation form also features a short list that coaches can use to score teachers on various items. For example, in instructional delivery, coaches might score a teacher on the Do Now, work samples, cold calling, workshop, and no opt-out. For instructional planning, they could score the teacher on data use and high-level questioning.

A rubric describes what basic, emerging, developing, advancing, and superior teaching will look like in the various categories. An emerging teacher uses formative assessments inconsistently and sometimes refers to student data, while a superior teacher effectively adjusts instruction based on the formative assessment process and

refers to student data to plan and execute a wide range of instructional strategies.

Not every category is covered during every observation. Clarke says that coaches emphasize different skills at different parts of the year. For example, at the beginning of the year, they are focused on student engagement: Is everyone on task? Are Common Core standards posted and explained? Then, as the year progresses, coaches push into other areas. *"Now we're looking for 'are you still at 100 percent engagement? What about small-group workshop, what does that look like? Is*

it clear what students should be doing at stations?'" Clarke says.

A few times a year, the instructional leader and teacher will have a more formal observation with a pre-conference, a full 40-minute observation, and a post-conference. *"If I were a teacher at Willow, I'd expect my dean in my classroom daily and my principal in there daily,"* Clarke says. *"I'd expect an informal observation once a week from the dean, and if something was glaring, she may be back on a Monday, Wednesday, or Friday to make sure she's giving the right support."*

Atlanta Heights Charter School Results

Atlanta Heights Charter School State Assessment Results

	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2014-14
Reading	75.3	83.3	86.7	91.4
ELA	74.1	84.9	87.0	87.2
Math	59.3	67.8	65.6	61.2
Science	48.8	55.4	63.0	61.4
Social Studies	48.7	46.1	54.7	61.8