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## Case Study: North Star Academy College Preparatory High School

Newark, NJ | 458 students | 100% minority | 83% low income

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### 2014 Ryan Award Winner: Michael Mann

Ashling Coffey stands before her classroom at North Star College Preparatory High School in Newark, NJ, “show-calling” one of her students. Only the student isn’t there. None are, actually. Instead, her instructional leader and fellow teacher Matthew McCluskey sits in the front of the class, taking on that role as he helps the first-year teacher practice a part of her lesson that was giving her trouble. He observed her class the day prior, and now is time for the debrief.

He watches, then interrupts. *“I’m sensing this is going to take too long,”* McCluskey says, and she nods. *“If you have time, definitely dig in like you are, but I think you can do this in a minute.”* Together, they draft a plan for how to cut out the excess words and questions, to get to the heart of her lesson: building a stronger topic sentence. Their conversation is honest and collaborative; they don’t skirt around her weaknesses. Both attack them head on. Coffey adds to McCluskey’s own observations, bringing up other issues she’s struggling with and wanting to practice again to get it right.

It’s this constant process of feedback and fine-tuning that helps North Star Academy College Preparatory High School and its predominantly

African-American, low-income students compete with students at the state’s wealthiest prep schools. That, and the uncompromising vision of the head of school, 2014 Ryan Award winner Michael Mann. After Mann helped turn around the high school, 94 percent of students in the classes of 2010 forward are either still in college or have graduated. Compare that to the rest of Newark,

where only 3 percent of eighth-graders are expected to earn a four-year college degree by the time they are 26. The progress they have made toward closing the achievement gap is impressive: North Star students in the Class of 2014 outscored white students nationally on the math and writing portions of the SAT.

School culture is set from the moment the students walk through the door, and it’s what makes the school succeed. Mann hires relatively green teachers who are experts in their

subject area, then uses the constant observation and feedback process to fill in the gaps they may have in classroom management skills and instructional technique. *“We’ve been able to attract and retain really great teachers who are brand new, inexperienced, and we just train the heck out of them,”* explains Mann. Expectations are clear for every moment of the day. Pass in homework



2014 Ryan Award Winner, Michael Mann, Head of School at North Star Academy College Preparatory High School (Newark, NJ)



and the places they can go aren't safe, or they're potentially fatally distracting in terms of who else is there....so for a lot of our students, it's either church, home or North Star." The school is a constant that the students and their families latch onto. "They know they can rely upon us and they do even long after they've graduated," he says. Through the North Star College Access and Success office, two staff members are charged with helping graduates through the sometimes hard transition to college and to do whatever they can to get the student to college graduation day.

during the morning assembly. If you don't have it, detention. In the front office, staff members each have signs on their desks outlining the matters they can help you with. These signs are everywhere in the school—guiding, cutting down on wasted time, and improving efficiencies.

An operations staff and two disciplinary deans help clear any distractions for teachers so they can focus on teaching. When none of the printers are working, operations director Chrissy Burgess is on the phone immediately. Her language and tone conveying: "I need this now." Teachers filter in the office asking why they can't print. She offers them alternative solutions, without putting down the phone.

In classrooms, lessons are timed, transitions are efficient, all lending to an urgency that pervades the building. Staff movements are paced this way because of a college goal that some say is daunting, but the North Star staff proves can be accomplished year in and year out.

"Newark is a very difficult place to grow up," Mann says. "A lot of students can't go anywhere

Mann says it takes minutes to get the school culture right, with the right systems, structures, mission and vision in place. Maintaining that culture is incredibly difficult. "Starting it is instantaneous because we've thought it all through even before they enter the building. When (students) are overwhelmed by that, when they see the design of this thing and that every adult in the school has the same vision and knows exactly what to say and what to do every instant of the student's experience, they become habituated to that very quickly," Mann says. "That's what we start with, then we go at academics very hard and very fast. And it turns out when you do those things, and you have a very well-designed, economic program, and you have a school culture that is very designed and structured, then students of color, regardless of whatever happened to them before, can perform at very high levels relatively quickly." He says many Americans don't seem to think that achievement is possible on the public dollar, and grasp at reasons why it can't be true. "This is not just possible, this should be normal," he says.

## CORNERSTONE I

# Transformational Leadership

### Driver 1: Create and Sustain a Movement

- 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

The 250 freshmen and sophomores file into the bright two-story gym where loud drum music is playing, taking their seats at their assigned table. Head of school Michael Mann insists on teaching this forum every year because it allows him to get to know every student, and to set a tone that will carry through their time at North Star.

*"You all came in and got your materials out. There was only one person who stared off into space, so I had to ask, 'Do I need to tell you everything to do like a 10-year-old?'"* Mann says to the students gathered. *"What is the solution so I don't have to be told like a 10-year-old?"* he asks the crowd of students before handing the mic over to one boy.

*"You just do it,"* the student replies. Mann nods and turns everyone's attention to a large screen to begin recognition of top-performing and most-improved students. The students' names are

projected onto the wall with music and applause. After the recognition, Mann moves onto the lesson for today: a selection from Geoff Colvin's "Talent is Overrated: What Really Separates World-Class Performers From Everybody Else."

Mann leads a discussion on how Americans tend to ascribe talent to people as either they worked hard or were born with it. *"Look at this room here. This is a room of only high-achieving students...and some of you are going to go to Yale, Cornell...We all want to know how to do that and get you to the best version of yourself,"* Mann says.

As he directs the students to discuss in small groups, he reminds them that North Star students have high standards and the teachers can't babysit them. *"We're relying on your hard work,"* he says, adding that those off task will have detention. The students start discussing at their tables, and the



room remains overall calm. After 15-20 minutes, Mann holds up his hand and quickly they quiet. "What is the author saying about innate talent?"

A student named Julian responds: "The author is saying that innate talent doesn't exactly exist."

Mann nods. "A very small part of people's success is what they're born with," he says. "We're all pretty much born the same, but our abilities don't develop the same." They discuss the first part of the reading, and then it's time for dismissal. The session closes out with one student saying



Head of School, Michael Mann, leads a 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade forum.

"Education is Freedom." And the rest responding: "One school. One mission."

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A Harvard alum who earned both his undergraduate and master's degrees in education there, Mann discovered the original North Star while searching for a school with great leadership, which he found lacking in many schools. Intrigued by the leadership and the ideas behind North Star, he decided to relocate to Newark to teach and coach there. He later was tapped to start the network's second middle school, which was the first replication for the organization that would eventually develop into Uncommon Schools. He ran that school successfully until 2009, when he was asked to take on the network's struggling high school. Mann says he was motivated to take the job because the students graduating from his

middle school were high-achieving, and he wanted to make sure they were moving on to a high school that would challenge them.

When he took over the high school, there hadn't been a clear vision for what it should be. In the absence of that, teachers all had their own ideas of what it should be. "It became the anti-middle school. Let's stop doing everything that we were doing in middle school, because they're quote-unquote older and need more independence, so we got rid of most of what had worked for us," Mann recalls. "We had a high school that was kind of aimless and also had people with very firm beliefs about what high school was and 12 different versions of what that was." The staff culture was toxic and the student culture undisciplined.

The first step was to divide the staff into three categories: Those who had to go right away, those who were on the fence about the changes about to happen, and the top third who would become the leaders of the new version of the high school. The group that was let go included the teachers "who made it all about their personalities, all about themselves and how close they were to the students, which was mostly about their own neediness," Mann says. He met with the two remaining groups and listened to their concerns and ideas, then introduced himself to the students that spring to warn them things would be a little different in the fall. But he explained the changes were necessary so they could raise the high school to a new level. At the end of the year, he did not renew any contracts for the middle group of teachers either. Reaction in the community was negative.

The second and most important part of turning the school around was choosing a vision. "We chose an athletic one," says Mann, who loves coaching sports as well. "I believe in the athletic metaphor. It's very clear to students about hard work and achievement and having a definite goal and not letting other stuff get in the way of that."

He conveyed the importance of teacher, student and parent buy-in by showing clips from the film "Remember the Titans," about a high school coach who whips his team into shape. During a scene where the coach played by Denzel Washington tears into a character who dropped the ball, he froze the screen on an assistant coach who gives a skeptical sideways glance. *"I stopped it right there and showed it to the faculty. What does this look mean?"* Mann recalls. The look undermined what the head coach was trying to accomplish, and also showed the assistant had pity for the players. Mann emphasized that the assistant was crippling the students by feeling sorry for them, not because he had empathy, but because he had pity, which Mann described as *"a destroyer of souls."* That clip led to a discussion about why it is necessary for the staff to be unified. *"We're trying to close the achievement gap here. This is not the easiest thing in the world and not many people are pulling it off. We can, and we have to,"* Mann says. *"The students here, their lives depend on us figuring this out."*

The students took to the vision, even though a new discipline system came crashing down on them in the fall. The parents of the senior class had the hardest time accepting the changes, and their feelings erupted at back-to-school night, where they started verbally attacking the new teachers. They accused the administration of firing the best teachers in the school. Those who had been let go *"were teachers students loved for all the wrong reasons, so it was heartbreaking and parents made that into issue No. 1,"* Mann says. He sent the new teachers home and stayed for hours listening to parents' concerns. *"They were mad and loud and angry. They accused us of not having good motives, of firing the wrong people, assigning too much homework. For every answer we'd have, they'd keep going in circles,"* he says. Mann listened and took notes, but told them nothing was going to change because the staff was focused on maintaining really high standards for their children so they could succeed in college

and beyond. *"We care about them not just when they're here and 17 years old and unhappy, but we care about them when they're 26 and what they're doing then,"* he says. At the end of the night, he offered to meet with parents again the following week, and they re-engaged in the exhaustive dialogue, which this time included students, too. Mann closed out the meeting in the same way, taking notes but insisting the school leadership was not planning to change anything.

The parents brought their concerns to the next meeting of the school board. Mann was presenting on all the changes being implemented at the high school, and he asked the board to not feed into the parental rage, or there would never be an end to it. Mann made his presentation and started cold-calling parents and students to voice some of their concerns. The meeting ended and the next day, Mann went to school and the students acted as if nothing had happened.

After that meeting, parents got tired, worn down by the consistent messaging presented by the staff. Mann and his team listened and acknowledged the students were doing a lot of homework, especially compared to some of the other nearby public high schools. But they reminded parents that students at high-performing schools in the suburbs were doing just as much homework, and they were the students against whom North Star students would be competing. *"I know it's painful and annoying. North Star is highly annoying. That's because we're demanding. We just kept repeating that same thing,"* Mann says. *"I said, 'I'm interested in your opinion. I just don't agree with it. I'm the one running the school.'" Eventually parents relented. "I get to be here every day for 8 or 9 hours, and there's no way they can devote that much time to resisting it, so we just went forward,"* he says.

As for enrolling the students in the vision, Mann didn't have to worry about the freshmen, because most of them were students from his own middle school and were accustomed to the systems. He

crafted a research class to give him the opportunity to teach the 10th-12th grade students with whom he didn't have a rapport. He still teaches both because he enjoys it, but also because it keeps him in touch with the students. *"That gives me control of the school in terms of the students, and also*

*teachers are able to see what the expectations and standards are, and also how to address a student who's not doing what you want," he says. "For me, that's really important to be able to model teaching and to be able to model the tone and the relationship we have with students."*

## CORNERSTONE I

# Transformational Leadership

### Driver 2: Create and Sustain Clarity

- 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 of 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

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Mann's staff cites his commitment to closing the achievement gap as keeping teachers, parents and students on point. *"Because of that laser-like focus on always being the best, that pushes him to really always look with a critical eye at what we're doing here, so we recognize our success, but keep coming back to figure out what we could do better,"* says Juliann Harris, dean of curriculum and instruction. *"Even though we are a really successful school, ask anyone here, there's always something else we're working on—always room to grow."*

From the main office to supply closets and classrooms, systems throughout the building let everyone know where to be and what to expect. Hanging inside every classroom door is a lesson plan that outlines every moment of classroom instruction. Teachers use a common format that prompts them to detail their daily objective, Do Now, the "heart of the lesson," Check for Understanding, and exit ticket with monitoring strategies infused throughout. Each part of the

lesson is allotted a certain number of minutes and teachers are expected to keep time.

Mann says every leader needs to decide what they do really well and focus on that. *"Student culture is a lever I know how to use. I know how to craft student culture so students are really ready for instruction,"* he says. Teaching a class every year, which allows him to set the tone in the school, is also important to him, but may not be to other leaders who want to focus on developing teachers. *"I know I'm not as good with observational feedback as Juliann and the department chairs. But I've got 11 of them to do that and Juliann to monitor that,"* Mann says. With Harris in place over other subjects, Mann focuses on science, while also leading the college office, the guidance office and the alumni support office—other areas that are important to him.

The staff has learned through trial and error to be deliberate about what they choose as their priorities. *"Keep it to just a few things that you can*





*implement really well and really consistently,” says Harris. “When we tried in the past to implement too many things, you always will drop the ball on something. Especially when it comes down to students, student relationships, and student culture, it’s important for students to see the consistency because they see, and they know, and will remember when you tried to do something or you said you were going to do something and it doesn’t happen. And so we’ve been really deliberate about the systems we’ve implemented for students and school culture.”* That sometimes means starting small and adding as certain parts solidify, such as with the North Star advisory system. The staff had advisory systems in the past that added too much to teachers’ workloads and ultimately failed. Now, the school has an advisory system that started with just a book club that didn’t require teachers to plan. *“Then, as that was*

*successful, we added the student leadership aspect to it, with teachers assigning a student leader from their advisory,” Harris says. “That expanded to include more present student leadership throughout the school. We built upon it year after year so it is the system it is today, but it did not start out like that.”*

Instructional leaders are regularly in classrooms benchmarking progress toward the ideal classroom environment. They meet with their assigned teachers weekly, making clear what good teaching looks like and what is expected of them. This crucial part of North Star’s model creates a consistency seen across classrooms. The templates and tools given to staff members further clarify expectations. For new teachers, the staff has a scale of progress that spells out what they should be working on in August, September, October, and so on.

Teacher Julia Addeo says there is no confusion about what the school should look like, which makes teachers’ jobs easier. Mann is *“very clear in what he wants the school to look like, and he’s clear in messaging that to staff, to parents, to the kids, and there is a very clear vision of what the school should look like at all times,”* she says. *“Because that’s all clear and laid out, not just by Mike, but by teachers, it makes it easy to focus on instruction.”* Having a dean of discipline who handles those issues for teachers enforces the idea that teachers’ focus is on instruction rather than behavioral issues.

## CORNERSTONE I

# Transformational Leadership

### Driver 3: Create and Sustain a High-Performing Team

- 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 & 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 performance evaluation rubric and results, and performance level is communicated directly and promptly by the leader

What makes North Star different from other schools is that Mann looks for teachers of a certain personality who are content experts. Most lack education experience and classroom management skills. But that doesn't faze him. With North Star's clear and concrete systems and structures, teachers can be taught those things rather quickly, he says. *"We can create the structures here so the students will be ready for whomever we put in the classroom, as long as they're really smart, really reflective, really hardworking and committed to the mission,"* Mann says.

When hiring, Mann is clear North Star is not a teacher autonomy school. *"Our curriculum, once it gets locked in, it's locked—we don't change it unless the College Board changes the AP exam. Once the lesson plans get designed, they're designed. They only get adapted for students with special needs,"* says Mann. *"We don't want people fiddling with the lesson plans or the curriculum once it is established, because that is incredibly*

*time- and energy-consuming. We want you to use your time and energy on teaching really well, on individual instruction, and on getting to know your students really well."*

The hiring process hinges on the guest lesson and the candidate's reactions to an aggressive debrief. *"For people who don't—or can't—do that, they tend to not remain interested,"* Mann says. A typical debrief will start with the school leaders asking for the person's assessment of the lesson. *"We're really looking for someone to be self-critical there,"* he says. The staff asks what percentage of students seemed to master the lesson, and the candidate usually offers a guess. The school leaders will drill down and ask for evidence. When the person can't provide it, they'll dig out the exit tickets and offer specifics to show what kind of approach they want to see teachers take. *"If they've reacted poorly until now, we don't do that part. There's no point to go further,"* Mann says. *"We're not trying to be unkind to this person, but we have to break through*

*the 'I-know-how-to-interview' façade because everyone has that, and we need to see if they can follow us down this path of looking really closely at student work and being held accountable for it."* School leaders are looking to see how the person reacts to that degree of accountability, *"because that's their whole life here as teachers,"* Mann says. *"Because we have to hire people with zero experience, we have to develop them into what we need from the ground up, and so if they can't participate in this analysis with us, then they can't be here."*

Candidates' reactions range from insistence that the lesson was great to immediately admitting failure. One current teacher, when asked how his guest lesson went, responded rather dejectedly: *"I don't think they learned a thing."* When he said that, Mann's reaction was: *"This is our kind of person!"* Another who cracked jokes throughout his lesson thought he had performed well. When Mann told him the students hadn't mastered the objective, the teacher candidate was having such a hard time with that news that they could see it in his physical reactions. He told them he had never received any critical feedback his entire life, and he asked to do a second lesson. *"He came back and it was marginally better, and he was very ready to reflect on it and to analyze the student performance,"* Mann recalls. And Mann again knew this was the type of person who would succeed at North Star.

Of the 11 people hired last year, 10 had no experience at all. *"We hire right out of school and train them up,"* Mann said. Teachers have to be primed for frequent observations by the instructional leaders on staff and school leaders. They are observed weekly and have regular meetings with their coaches.

New teachers are introduced to the North Star ways during a one-week summer session held before the regular teachers return to school. Even teachers who have had some experience are run

through the orientation, because teaching at North Star is a different experience. New team members work on "Teach Like a Champion" practices, from the popular book written by Doug Lemov, a managing director for Uncommon Schools. They learn the PRIDE system (Professionalism, Reflection, Integrity, Determination and Enthusiasm ) that dictates behavior management and cultural rules such as the importance of checking uniforms daily.

The freshmen arrive for induction before the older students. The returning teachers teach the first day and the new teachers observe. The second day, the new teachers take the stage and receive their first real feedback. *"You hear about the bumps you need to fix before the first day of school,"* says first-year teacher Ashling Coffey. Teachers are not necessarily in front of their own class yet, but making certain adjustments can help them set the right tone for the year. Coffey says she received helpful feedback from two more experienced teachers. *"The things they gave me were such quick hits that I was able to fix them before the first day. One was: stop smiling so much. You look too nice and you're going to get walked all over. And also one of the big things I was able to immediately fix was to stop walking around when giving instructions. Stand still. And that's so easy to change and makes a huge tone difference in the classroom,"* she says. *"On the first day of school, I wasn't as nervous, because I'd been in front of them, and I had it in my head I would do those things."*

Julia Addeo, a second-year teacher, is a good example of the type of teacher North Star seeks. She majored in math, not education, and actually intended to become an actuary. She came to North Star because *"I felt it was a place I was going to grow, and become the best teacher I could be in the shortest amount of time,"* she says. She also found the orientation helpful to getting a good start to the year. *"It's really valuable for all new*



*staff to learn the same behavior management techniques, to go through the same lesson planning, to be onboarded in the same way.”* The new teachers invest time understanding classroom procedures, and practice things such as how to greet students when they enter the classroom. They also dive into the mission and what makes North Star different; what makes it work. *“Making sure the staff understands all those things, it’s why our staff culture is so strong, we are very mission-aligned,”* Addeo says.

While turnover is a challenge at North Star, Addeo says she continues at North Star because she feels valued and receives praise for work she does

well. She also feels supported. *“I invest a lot of my time here, and it pays back in ways I need it to. It’s more than a job to our staff, to a lot of us this is our life, and we connect over that idea,”* she says. For example, earlier in the year, a few teachers had to resign for personal reasons during the school year, which was stressful for some on staff. But it was helpful to hear Mann’s recognition of all those things, she says. *“It was ‘we’re not going to sweep it under the rug. It’s affecting us, we’re all picking up slack in ways we weren’t necessarily prepared to.’ But it helps going back to that praise, regrounding us in why we even do this, and making sure our community is strong.”*

## CORNERSTONE I

# Transformational Leadership

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

- 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

The day starts in the gym with breakfast, with students turning their homework into color-coded trays at the front of the room. Those who have incomplete assignments will have detention later that day, from 3:45 to 5 p.m. If students miss multiple homework assignments, they're suspended. The handbook clearly spells out that students will have 2-3 hours of homework per night. When it's time for the day to begin, the students all raise hands to indicate they're ready, and quiet descends on the room. Students listen to announcements before it's time to head to class. Tables are left clean behind them. Mann picks up scraps of paper off the floor as he walks through the hall. He stops a student who is nearly jogging down the stairs, quietly reminding him to slow down. He nods at a girl whose shirt is untucked and just says, "Shirt."

To drive home the college focus, each homeroom is named for a university. Halls are adorned with giant inspirational quotes. Laminated pages with seniors' college acceptance letters cover one wall. Students line up outside the classroom doors,

greeting teachers with morning handshakes or high fives. They are heading to a half-hour morning advisory that's same-sex but mixes different grade levels. *"The day is so structured, there's very little time for students and teachers to have a more relaxed conversation or build relationships that are not based on their class,"* says Juliann Harris, dean of curriculum and instruction. *"Advisory is the opportunity for teachers to do that with students."*

The school's discipline system is clear and non-negotiable. But the strict system results in students being respectful and cultivating their best selves, Mann says. Students *"know this is a place where it's easy to be a good student. It's easy to be a good person, and it's really hard to be a bad person, because this school will catch it and punish it, and we'll call their parents in, and we'll lay it right at the foot of their parents as them being the ones responsible for this situation,"* he says. The students, he says, are easy to teach with such a system in place.



Dean of students Mikal McDaniel brings the right level of strictness and warmth to the school's discipline system, says Harris. *"We'd not be able to have the system we have without a really good dean, because what that allows Mike and I to do is focus on instruction,"* she says. *"Depending on what the student issue is, it could consume your whole day, so you're not observing, you're not giving feedback, you're not thinking about instruction."*

The staff uses the PRIDE system, which revolves around the values of Professionalism, Reflection, Integrity, Determination and Enthusiasm. Teachers can both award and deduct PRIDE points from students, tracking their totals on the iPad throughout the week. Each student starts the week with 40 points, and if someone goes below 30 points, he or she will have 10 hours of detention the following week.

First-year teacher Ashling Coffey finds the system very effective with freshmen. She will take a point from the whole class if students have a poor entrance or give the class a point if everyone is really focused, she says. If a student needs more attention, a teacher can send him or her down to the deans. *"If I've already spoken to you twice during class and I see you actively not paying attention to what we're doing, you're not ready to be here so you're wasting everybody's time. It sets the tone for students that we're serious here and we do our work. We don't play around,"* says Coffey.

When students are sent to the dean, *"we try and explain to them what the issue is and how they need to be more appropriate in the classroom so they can make it a conducive learning environment,"* explains Angela Marchell, associate

dean of students. Depending on what information emerges from a meeting with the student, the deans may also involve the school social worker. Any time a student is sent out of class, he or she has to debrief with the teacher later during the day to understand the steps that will allow the student to return to the classroom.

To further enable teachers to focus on teaching, an operations team also helps free up teachers. Broken equipment is repaired. Copies are made by interns instead of teachers. Supplies are restocked.

The students' focus is centered on college throughout their time at North Star. In addition to the core classes, students take a college readiness class. In 9th grade, it touches on financial literacy,

student loans and other issues. Juniors focus on choosing a college, while in senior year, they complete applications, search for scholarships and read about graduating in four years so they're not paying for extra years of college.

To make sure all the hard work that North Star students do in high

school isn't in vain, North Star staff follow students to their college campuses, helping them navigate the obstacles that might otherwise cause first-generation college students to drop out. Two full-time staff members travel around the country helping alums organize their schedules, plan their free time, stay on top of financial aid paperwork, and problem solve any issues in their social life.

Through the effort, which is backed mostly by private funders, each student receives at least one visit a semester, and may receive additional visits if needed. The most common obstacles aren't academic. *"They are academically prepared when they go off to college,"* says Anna Taylor, alumni



College acceptance letters for the Class of 2015.



North Star seniors work on college applications.

liaison. North Star graduates struggle more with time management, accountability, and handling difficult social interactions. *"They have a lot of support here, which is a wonderful thing, but then suddenly you're like, 'Alright—go to college, now you're responsible for everything.' We see students struggle adjusting to this new level, not just of responsibility, but also freedom to make your own decisions,"* she says. Whereas in high school, their days were jam-packed from 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., then followed by a couple hours of homework, as college freshmen, they may have only four classes. *"They think they have all the time in the world, then it's like crunch time, and they're behind,"* Taylor says.

Taylor works to end those stories of students who stop out of college for missing a paper deadline and having their schedule dropped. *"These are things that could have been totally avoided, but when you work with a population where many of them are first-generation students, who's telling them these things? Who's guiding them versus families where people have always gone to college? It's easy to pick up the phone, call home and say 'Hey mom, I got this letter from school. What am I supposed to do?'* Mom knows what to say, versus a lot of the students we work with, Mom or Dad doesn't know what to say, and the older sibling doesn't know what to say," she says.

## CORNERSTONE II

# Academic Accelerators: Systems and Structures

### Driver 1: Implement Extended Day/Year Effectively

- 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 differentiated and small group instruction
- School-wide and classroom systems and procedures maximize instructional time, reduce transition time, and increase student academic engagement

Every minute of class time at North Star is planned to maximize instruction. *"We didn't even used to have transition times between classes,"* says Juliann Harris, dean of curriculum and instruction. *"It used to be class ended at 10:15, and the next class starts at 10:15. But we've built in some time as we've grown."* Students are accustomed to starting work on the Do Now the second they get in the door, so very little instructional time is lost. The school day runs from 8:15 a.m. to 3:45 p.m. followed by after-school activities. School is in session 192 calendar days. In addition to their core academic classes, students can choose between theater, debate and engineering.

Teachers have time built into their weekly schedule so they can meet with their instructional leader to debrief, set goals, review data, and practice strategies. They also have time to co-plan with other teachers in their department and to work on data analysis and assessments. An early dismissal on Friday allows for staffwide professional development in the afternoon.

In Julia Addeo's Accelerated Algebra class, she sets the timer for three minutes, then stands by the door to greet each student walking in the room. *"Go right to the pencil sharpener, sit down*

*and work on your Do Now,"* she says. Over their shoulders, she surveys their papers, which are topped by the line *"Education is Freedom."*

The timer beeps. *"Do Now away. Homework away,"* she says, her clip is quick, her tone firm as she launches into a lesson on quadratic equations.

*"You have 10 seconds to identify two roots of the graph and a point on the graph,"* she snaps her fingers as she waits. Almost every student raises their hand to answer the first question. *"Nice,"* Addeo says as she scans the room.

Keeping this quick tempo is important, says Addeo, because historically people have dismissed students of color based on their zip code. *"We feel an urgency to make sure that doesn't happen,"* she says. Timing lessons helps her stay on top of whether she's getting through everything she needs. Transitions are important to keeping the class moving, so she gives students specific time goals to take care of those small tasks like putting papers away. This is purposeful, *"so I'm not spending a lot of time watching them organize themselves, because we have instruction to do,"* she says. Time stamps are included throughout lesson plans.



## CORNERSTONE II

# Academic Accelerators: Systems and Structures

### Driver 2: Implement Robust and Frequent Assessment Capability

- 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 3 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

Uncommon Schools, including North Star, has been a lab of sorts for school leaders thinking outside of the box to develop practices that can be scaled across the country to close the achievement gap. One result of this work, the book “Driven by Data” by managing director Paul Bambrick-Santoyo, is a leading guide for data-driven instruction. As such, the entire North Star staff is focused daily on using data to keep themselves on track, to course correct, and to hold each other accountable. “*We are constantly collecting data from the second kids walk into the classroom,*” says Juliann Harris, dean of curriculum and instruction. “*For every class assignment, teachers are collecting data points.*” They have thought through the systems in detail, and teachers have templates that walk them through solid, proven data analysis processes. Lesson plan templates prompt them to constantly collect data on where their students’ stand in a lesson

and to shift course, if needed, to meet them where they are.

North Star recently adopted the Common Core standards, and is re-aligning all its assessments and curriculum to the new standards and to the PARCC exam. They also incorporate AP exams when developing the assessments. While student progress is monitored daily, larger interim assessments are administered every 10 weeks. When switching to Common Core, the staff first wrote the assessments, and is in the process of rewriting the curriculum to match up with the new assessments, Harris says.

In addition to the interim assessments, North Star’s assessment calendar includes the New Jersey state assessments, the PSAT, the SAT, PARCC, and AP exams.

The week is structured so teachers have regular meetings with instructional leaders where data





*First-year teacher Ashling Coffey discusses a lesson during an observation and feedback meeting with instructional lead Matthew McCluskey.*

is reviewed. During these meetings, teachers and their instructional leader will review essays, quizzes, exit tickets, writing samples, and the larger

exams. Harris says the staff is focused on fine-tuning the process to include student work as a part of the observation and feedback meetings.

Teachers are trained to react to data in the moment. For example, during a feedback meeting that instructional leader Matthew McCluskey has with first-year teacher Ashling Coffey, he praises her for recognizing when students failed to grasp a lesson on a difficult section of text. During his observation of the lesson, he noted that she shifted gears immediately. *"You responded to the data in the room,"* he says. *"The way you did it, I would have thought that was your plan."* They later will practice how she may have to deviate from her plan in the moment as she tries to read whether students mastered the objective or not.

## CORNERSTONE II

# Academic Accelerators: Systems and Structures

### Driver 3: Implement Small Group Instruction

- Leader identifies the differentiation and small group instruction implementation expectations for staff
- Strong tracking of student assessment data exists (growth assessments, interim assessments, checks for understanding, exit slips, and unit assessments) 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 students needs, accelerating achievement for all students

As part of the regular data analysis, teachers identify students who should receive additional small group or mandatory tutoring support. Every teacher provides tutoring for at least one hour a week after school, and sometimes, there may be extra time for tutoring during lunch or early in the morning. If a student is struggling at any point, the teacher can assign them to mandatory tutoring after school. Students could be assigned to tutoring every week until the next interim assessment, or for just one week if they need to work on one particular skill or concept.

In a typical day, small-group work takes place in literature circles or for interim assessment review. Some classes are already arranged in ways that make small group work immediate and easy, as in a history class where the desks are arranged in tables so students can easily transition into group conversations while the teacher moves

from group to group evaluating, pushing or correcting their discussions.

Students who need extra help also will receive pullout support, but it's not a traditional pullout. *"Instead of replacing their English class, they get a double English class,"* says Tildi Sharp, North Star's skill enhancement chair who heads up a staff of six. *"Whereas pullout in regular special education terminology means students removed from their English class, we have a group of students who get double instruction."*

Students can also have in-class support, where a special education teacher goes into the classroom and co-teaches the class. Lastly, students who need more intensive services may be assigned to a smaller classroom of students.

As with other hires, the "skills enhancement" staff members are hired according to subject expertise.

*"We are able to split the subjects and align really closely with the general education classes, to make sure we're differentiating and presenting things in a different way, so the kids are getting really high-level content support,"* Sharp says. Sharp teaches pre-calculus, pushing into the class once a week and also pulling the students into a special group once a week for extra help. However, the students are not pulled from pre-calculus, they're pulled from study hall or theater for the second round of math with her.



*English teacher Sarah Schrag works with a small group during a class discussion.*

Special education teachers are held to the same planning standards as general education teachers. The lessons contain more differentiation and are more individualized. Students are held to the same

level of accountability but the staff uses a more scaffolded approach. *"If you are struggling, it can be hard to struggle every day,"* Sharp says. *"We may give them more warnings, or differentiate the discipline system, but ultimately they're held to the same level of accountability."*

Data plays as central a role too, as the staff looks for areas where the special education students may have performed poorly but general education students performed well. *"If everyone performs poorly that will be retaught in the general*

*education classroom. We're looking for the gaps specific to special education, so we can create reteach plans to teach in our pullout groups,"* Sharp says.

## CORNERSTONE II

# Academic Accelerators: Systems and Structures

### Driver 4: Implement Standards-Based Curriculum

- The leader identifies Common Core/College-Readiness Standards and defines curriculum implementation expectations for staff
- Curriculum maps exist that 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

North Star's curriculum is based on Common Core standards, but the staff also uses AP exams and the SAT to help guide their plans, says Juliann Harris, dean of curriculum and instruction. The implementation of the PARCC exam has required further realignment.

To make the shift to Common Core standards and PARCC, the staff started by rewriting interim assessments. When the English Department started work on its assessment, staff members translated the applicable Common Core standards into more teacher-friendly language so they could start with that. While the standards are rigorous, the language is not always totally clear, and interpretation for the classroom level definitely helps, says teacher Matthew McCluskey. For English and Language Arts, the shift to Common Core also required staff to re-evaluate the novels used and to add more complicated nonfiction texts. They also pushed harder into close reading and argumentation, which both are skills emphasized by the Common Core.

With all the changes this year, the staff has invested a lot of time into studying the standards, rewriting curriculum maps, and developing assessments to better align with PARCC. The ELA department meets three hours one day a week on curriculum.

The rest of the curriculum is developed in a similar way by staff. *"We don't buy stuff,"* says Harris. *"In a few cases especially with some of our special education students, we have purchased some curriculum. But for the most part we're developing it based on the standards, which are Common Core, and we also use AP exams and SAT."* Before Common Core, the AP and SAT exams were the bars to hit. So when PARCC came along, *"our gap wasn't as big as some others with PARCC because we always shot higher than our state standards and assessment which was not really a measure of college readiness at all,"* Harris says.

In general, teachers are provided with a curriculum map at the beginning of the year detailing the major standards they need to hit.

They also follow a template for their lesson plans that prompts them to spell out the essential parts of the lesson: the Do Now, the checks for understanding, and the exit ticket. The plans are posted just inside the doorway to the classroom so instructional coaches, school leaders, or visitors can check to see that it's being implemented. Teachers' plans generally include anticipated shifts they may need to make mid-lesson should students not show mastery of a particular objective, along

with details, such as which students they will question to gauge understanding.

Instructional leaders, who are managed by Harris and Mann, monitor lesson plans and visit classrooms frequently to keep teachers accountable. Teachers submit lesson plans for the week ahead by Friday afternoon. The instructional leader reviews and returns the plans with feedback by midday Sunday. Teams meet to review curriculum maps, and to go over student work to identify any gaps.

## CORNERSTONE III

# Developing “Black Belt” Teaching

### Driver 1: Ensure teacher proficiency with Curricular Tools and Resources

- 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

Instead of hiring teachers who studied education in college, North Star’s leadership searches for content experts who can be trained to teach well. *“We found we are very good at developing people as teachers. It is very hard to try to fill in content knowledge gaps for our teachers while we are trying to teach them how to be good teachers, so when we are hiring people, that’s one of the first things we look for,”* says Juliann Harris. To assess their content knowledge, potential teachers take the interim assessments that are administered to students and are asked to explain certain ideas as they would to students.

The detailed lesson plans help flag situations when teachers might need extra help in a particular area of the curriculum because they detail how they are going to explain their content. For example, when reviewing a math teacher’s lesson plans, Harris noticed the teacher was using an incorrect term.

She was able to pull the teacher aside and correct the misunderstanding before it led to further confusion in the classroom.

*“But for the most part, we don’t want to do a lot of development of their knowledge. Pushing them to learn new ways to teach things is different than actually having to teach them the content,”* she says.

Teachers are provided with their curriculum materials before the school year starts so they can get up to speed, and the instructional leaders work closely with teachers to fill in any gaps.

During weekly professional development sessions, teachers are often broken up according to department so they can work on techniques important to their subject matter, such as close reading.

## CORNERSTONE III

# Developing “Black Belt” Teaching

### Driver 2: Ensure teacher proficiency in Using Assessment Data to Individualize Instruction

- Teachers use data trends from student growth and interim assessment data, checks 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 an 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

All new teachers receive training in data-driven instruction led by expert Paul Bambrick-Santoyo, a managing director at the Uncommon Schools network who wrote one of the school data bibles, “Driven by Data.” Once October brings results from the first round of interim assessments, instructional leaders will run through a data analysis with new teachers. They will bring in previous data analysis reports to demonstrate what it should look like.

For the second round of testing, the new teachers will do that analysis on their own, under the review of the instructional leader.

Teachers are provided a template to guide the data analysis, explains Harris. The templates prompt teachers to look at the whole class data to see areas where many students are struggling as well as areas where individual students are lacking skills. The meeting structure that’s been developed for instructional leaders and teachers to use for reviewing their data aims for a reflective process that helps teachers gain skills to better analyze data in the future while also producing immediate action steps for teachers to begin implementing.

The meetings follow a similar process as the observation and feedback meetings in terms of praise, inquiry and other steps. “*They go through their analysis of why students got certain things wrong. The department chair will assess that and push them to dig deeper,*” Harris says. “*If the teacher says I’m just going to put this on Do Nows from now on, the department chair’s role is to then say ‘Look—is that going to get at that misunderstanding?’ and if not, what is going to get at that misunderstanding? And they’ll adjust the lessons moving forward.*” Teachers fill out a plan that guides instruction for the next six weeks, laying out week by week what are the skills that will be retaught or spiraled.

If performance was low on one standard, they may plan two reteaches around that standard. “*And we plan that we’re going to have a test in week 5 to see how they’ve done, so we’re not going into the next Interim Assessment cold,*” instructional lead Matthew McCluskey says. “*If students are still struggling with it, we’ll analyze again and do it again.*” The data meetings also include more comprehensive analysis on

individual students, identifying whether the lower performing students need to go to tutorial or whether higher performing students need to be challenged in different ways.

Beyond that quarterly dive, the entire staff is consistently looking at student work on a daily basis, teachers say. For the English department, regular examination of student writing has been key, as they've found *"instruction almost always translates into writing,"* McCluskey says. On a weekly basis, the department heads ask teachers to pass on student writing examples, which they will review to determine where students are progressing and where areas for growth exist. *"When we do the (classroom) walkthroughs after analyzing the writing, almost always we'll see something happening in instruction that led to that result in student writing,"* McCluskey says. He will study the samples before his feedback meetings with individual teachers to get a sense of the big takeaways they need to discuss and then they will look at the examples together and write action steps. *"It's one of the most honest gauges of ourselves as instructors,"* he says.

As far as individualized instruction, teachers say the school model and culture make it so they must know every student's learning style. Instead

of I do, We do, You Do as the primary lesson type, North Star uses a *"here's a problem, do it"* approach, says McCluskey. *"The teacher aggressively monitors what's happening within the room, and says 'Oh, 80 percent of students have this, let's go deeper, or only 40 percent of students have it, I need to do remediation,'"* he says. *"With the nature of that instruction, teachers have to have a really strong sense of who is in every single seat."* Teachers need to think through the type of support one student may need and have backup questions ready to go for another. In lesson plan templates, teachers are prompted to write out aggressive monitoring reminders as well as to anticipate student errors. The lesson plan spells out what the teacher will do "if most get it," "if half get it," and "if most don't get it."

To make time for one-on-one and small group instruction to take place, teachers have the opportunity to meet with lower-performing students once a week for mandatory tutoring to pull them up to the level where they should be. To keep the students and their parents apprised of their performance, students are given grade reports halfway through each quarter. Parents are required to meet with the teacher to pick up the student's quarterly report card.

## CORNERSTONE III

# Developing “Black Belt” Teaching

### Driver 3: Implement Strategic Whole School Professional Development

- 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

Every Friday, students are dismissed at 12:35 p.m. to create built-in time for professional development. Each spring, school leaders write a strategic plan for the year to come, and sketch out a professional development calendar. But Juliann Harris says that school leaders build in flexibility so they can respond to needs that may crop up throughout the year. *“If we are doing lots of observations and see teachers struggling with a particular thing in common, we’ll develop a PD on that,”* Harris says. The PD calendar will touch on several buckets important to the school’s success: data, student culture, staff culture, and instruction. The leadership also tries to differentiate PD, so they can offer different sessions for newer teachers and for more experienced staff members. Sometimes, the staff will break into groups by department to focus on content, or by grade-level team to discuss individual students.

*“There’s an end goal by the end of the PD, which feels very satisfying that we are changing things up, making progress,”* says teacher Ashling Coffey. Recent topics have included using a data analysis program called Illuminate to produce reports on the interim assessments.

Another session provided an introduction to PARCC. As with all lessons, the teachers started with a Do Now. Practice is a key part of most sessions, with teachers often playing the role of different students to challenge teachers’ responses. *“A teacher will step out into the hallway and we’ll decide who’s going to get it right, who’s going to have this error, and what it is going to be,”* Coffey says.

Earlier in the year, the PDs were more targeted to whole school goals. When leaders noticed that the staff might benefit from a reminder on aggressive



*After students are dismissed early, the whole staff gathers for a Friday professional development session on PARCC.*

monitoring, a PD session was scheduled on it. Later in the year, the whole-staff sessions became more departmentally-focused.

McCluskey finds the departmental professional developments helpful because they can really dive

into content. The English department has used it to drill down into close reading to prepare for Common Core. *“Almost all of our PDs were based on what we were seeing in close reading in our observations,”* he says.

## CORNERSTONE III

# Developing “Black Belt” Teaching

### Driver 4: Implement Strategic High-Frequency Coaching

- 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 min. weekly, an 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
- Leaders holds staff accountable for the progress and results of high-frequency coaching and school-wide professional development objectives

Teachers are observed weekly and also meet weekly with their instructional leader for a debrief. The feedback meetings follow a 6-step protocol. Praise is the first step of the feedback meeting, to prep teachers for the critical feedback they are about to receive. *“We’ve just found people are more open-minded that way,”* says Head of School Michael Mann. But the praise should be precise, not vague, he says. Next comes a “probing question” designed *“to get the teacher to the conclusion that we’ve already reached about what they need to do,”* Mann explains. *“We’ve found people don’t really make changes unless they’ve gone through the thinking process about why the change needs to be made.”* This process helps the teacher become accustomed to self-reflection and to start noticing things about their practice even when they are not being observed. The instructional leaders bring in evidence to help the teacher understand where their missteps may lie. After this discussion, the teacher and instructional leader design the next action step for the teacher to focus on, then they practice. If they agree the teacher is going to work on getting their timing

right on the oral drill, they will run through it. They will troubleshoot through any obstacles. Say a teacher could benefit from a clip board to hold their lesson plan, the teachers will retrieve a clipboard from the supply closet. *“It sounds like minutiae, but it often adds up to practice that’s either efficient or haphazard,”* Mann says. The feedback will be incorporated into future lesson plans with a solid timeline set.

The model for weekly observation and feedback cycles are codified in *“Leverage Leadership,”* another book written by Uncommon Schools Managing Director Paul Bambrick-Santoyo. Juliann Harris, dean of curriculum and instruction, meets weekly with the instructional leaders to monitor the feedback they are providing teachers. Harris has a template that’s used for her check-in meetings with the leads. They start off by looking at the week’s observations and the feedback given to teachers. *“Then we’ll tweak that feedback and practice some of that feedback in the meeting,”* Harris says. *“I also do observations of the teachers on my own, or jointly with the department chair,*



*so we'll see if we're seeing the same things or if there are different ways we can push the teacher in terms of their growth and development."* She sometimes uses video to observe the instructional leads and their check-in meetings. All of the observation and feedback information is tracked in a shared Google document, which they review on a weekly basis. The document is used in prepping professional development.

To make sure all of the instructional leads are being consistent in their observations and feedback, Paul Bambrick-Santoyo runs a professional development session for new instructional leaders, where they are taught how to run meetings that incorporate the 6 steps of the observation and feedback cycle. They also learn how to facilitate the Interim Assessment data analysis meetings. Then, all instructional leaders in the network meet once a month for four hours offsite for a professional development session. They delve into whatever areas have emerged as a need among the staff.

To help leaders provide consistent feedback to inexperienced teachers, the leadership has developed a rookie teacher scope and sequence that helps an instructional leader take a brand new teacher and train them with the skills that have proven to make North Star teachers successful. *"At a certain point, you exhaust that scope and sequence document, as it really only takes you through the first couple months, then it becomes more nuanced,"* says teacher Matthew McCluskey. The feedback in the first couple months is easier, with quick hits on things like reminding the newbie teacher to cold call more. *"But once teachers get stronger and stronger, the action steps get much more content-specific,"* he says.

When an instructional leader goes into a teacher's classroom once or twice a week, he or she enters notes into a shared tracking document that all instructional leads, as well as school leaders, can access. Up top, the tracker document lists the teacher's overall professional development goals,

along with goals for data-driven instruction and special needs students.

In setting coaching goals, instructional leaders are looking to focus teachers on one or two goals. Too much feedback may overwhelm them and not last. By concentrating on one or two action steps, the coaches aim for the feedback to stick with teachers. They arm teachers with action items that can improve their classroom immediately and can be internalized to be replicated week after week. They don't want the teacher to make the improvement for only a week, then drop it or forget about it once new goals are identified.

McCluskey says that he takes both objective and subjective notes during his twice-weekly class visits. He records time-stamped, more objective notes that detail exactly what the teacher is saying and doing in the moment. More subjective feedback may include observations that teacher ratio is off, or that discussion could be improved by a different technique. At the end of the lesson, he will reflect on the entirety of the lesson before determining areas of growth and how the teacher is performing according to previous agreed-upon action steps. He'll write those thoughts in another box on the form. During one recent observation cycle, he noticed a first-year teacher was doing much of the talking in the class instead of the students. They agreed that her action step would be to facilitate classroom discussion by cold-calling three students in a row, who would respond to each other, while she would only use the student names to move the discussion. *"This action step really pulled in as much as possible, but it's still bite-sized in that she can implement it immediately,"* McCluskey says. But it gets at teacher-student ratio, includes 100 percent of students, forces students to respond to each other, and challenges the teacher to stop lining up answers. *"This one action step allowed me to hone in on 5 or 6 things that I was noticing and fix them all at once,"* he says.

The instructional leads are constantly reviewing data from the observations, considering the teacher's progression toward mastery of their PD goals. The leads are also responsible for formal evaluations, which are comprehensive.

Coaches will also provide in-the-moment feedback to teachers during observations. They also get to know the students in each class so they can help decipher roadblocks and discuss best strategies for certain students during feedback meetings.

Recently the staff has incorporated a review of student work into the cycle. The instructional leaders, under Harris' supervision, will evaluate the objective of the class and what students produced. Was it the right objective and how does it connect to the interim assessment objectives? "It's allowed us to really focus our feedback and see how effective our feedback has been, especially as teachers move beyond needing feedback on classroom management," Harris says. "Looking at student work helps us see where the teacher really is."

Feedback meetings with first-year teachers may look different than those with more experienced teachers. For more veteran teachers, "those meetings would be much more collaborative and looking at new ways to improve the lesson types, codifying best practices so they could be shared with other teachers," Harris says. Lesson planning is often part of the meeting as well, as the staff updates the curriculum to prepare for PARCC.

During a recent feedback meeting, McCluskey and 4th-year teacher Sarah Schrag work on moving the classroom discussion where she wants it to go. They practice steering the conversation back from students who go off on tangents, are off topic or make comments that are incorrect.

Schrag, who is in her second year at North Star, is determined to start flagging incorrect or basic comments. She stands in front of her classroom and rehearses. "Thanks, that's not a good enough comment. I need a better comment," she says to McCluskey, who is again playing the role of student.

They decide to film an upcoming lesson and that she will prepare her own feedback as if she were a coach. They also decide she needs to focus on bringing urgency back to one of her classes, where

students are taking an extra-long time taking out their books. Instead of correcting the whole class, they decide she will narrate positive behavior, and use her tone and movements to create a sense of urgency. McCluskey stands up in the front of room, walking quickly, shoes clicking on the tile floor. "Take out Fahrenheit 451, we're going to have a hands

down discussion. Eyes this way, quickly," he says, modeling the teacher steps.

Then he turns it over to Schrag to practice. She's tapping on desks, bringing attention to the front of the room, and pushing the invisible students to hurry. "That's so much faster, the movement was great," he says.

McCluskey follows a similar meeting itinerary with first-year teacher Ashling Coffey, but they are focused on different action steps.

As their meeting begins, McCluskey is effusive in praising her for the number of hands raised in the class he observed. "You got them excited about it," he says. Engagement is good, but he wants to talk about what to do with the students once they're paying attention. "One of the most beautiful moments of my week is seeing 14 and 15-year-olds with their hands in the air like they're 5th-graders," he says.



Instructional lead Matthew McCluskey demonstrates a technique to a first-year teacher during an observation and feedback meeting.



Principal Michael Mann talks with a student during a break in the school day. "Newark is a very difficult place to grow up," Mann says. "A lot of students can't go anywhere, and the places they can go aren't safe, or they're potentially fatally distracting in terms of who else is there....so for a lot of our students, it's either church, home or North Star. They know they can rely upon us and they do even long after they've graduated," he says.

He focuses their conversation on show call, which has teachers showcase a particular student's work to demonstrate a point. Coffey stands in front of the class and acts through what she did in class, with McCluskey interrupting her to recalibrate her timing or make a suggestion about the students she should call on next. He points out she is doing too much of the talking as she does the practice run-through. Her responses are honest and she seems genuinely curious about ways she might improve.

He looks around the room and says a topic sentence poster would help. "I point to it once a week. I'll get you one printed," he says.

They agree on her next action step: Teacher will practice show-calling with a concrete goal and a 2-minute time period.

"You're going to master this within the next two weeks," McCluskey says. "Then I think we can move to start thinking about engagement. You have it, but

I want to hone it." He reminds her to call students out for not adhering to uniform rules, even in their socks. They talk about the culture of certain classrooms, as one has a "smart kid" culture that makes her worry about a student who lacks confidence. They go over some homework examples and her lesson plan, walking through their expectations of how students will react to the lesson.

Coffey said it was surprisingly easy to get used to talking about her weaknesses in the classroom. "I know it is hard for some people," she says. "But it's also phrased in a way that 'this is what you need to focus on,' not 'this is what you did wrong.'" As a result of the critical feedback, when they give her praise she believes them. "I don't think Matthew told me something to boost my ego. He told me because I did something correctly, because I trust him to tell me when I don't do things correctly," she says.

# North Star Academy College Prep Results

