

# Harnessing Collaborative Expertise:

## DEVELOPING COLLABORATIVE TEAMS OF SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

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THE HEATLY SCHOOL, GREEN ISLAND UFSD  
GREEN ISLAND, NY

*Transforming student performance at Heatly School began with a powerful shift in how educators engaged in professional learning communities (PLCs). By focusing on the What, Why, and How of PLCs, a foundation of trust, professionalism, communication, and feedback was built. This intentional approach fostered a collaborative environment where educators learned from and with one another, shared goals, and embraced data-driven instruction. As a result, we fostered collective efficacy that produced enhanced teaching strategies, tailored and decisive interventions, and ultimately, substantial improvements in student achievement.*

## BACKGROUND

As of June 2022, Heatly School in Green Island, New York, served 265 students from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. The student body was diverse, with approximately 35% identifying as minorities and 70% classified as economically disadvantaged. Unfortunately, only 22% of students achieved proficiency in Math and Reading, leading the New York State Education Department (NYSED) to designate Heatly School as a Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) school. This designation placed Heatly in the bottom 5% of all New York schools in terms of student performance. The school struggled to establish a clear direction and focus, with a chronic absenteeism rate of 40% and a staff turnover rate of 38%. These challenges contributed to a lack of a supportive learning culture. Further analysis revealed the absence of a consistent curriculum and a lack of coherence between grade bands regarding learner expectations. As a result, student engagement and the overall impact on learning were severely compromised at all levels.

## CHALLENGE

As a PreK-12 school, Heatly School faced an inherent culture of isolation due to its unique structure, with only one class at each grade level. While special area teachers collaborated across grade levels, the school was effectively divided into two distinct educational environments: a PreK-6 elementary school and a 7-12 secondary school. This division contributed to a limited exchange of ideas and strategies among educators. Compounding this issue was the absence of high-yield instructional practices. The faculty's desire to improve was evident; however, the lack of focused professional development hindered their ability to implement effective tier-one instructional strategies. Without adequate support and training, teachers struggled to create engaging and impactful learning experiences, perpetuating a cycle of disengagement and underperformance among students.

## ENGAGING THE CENTER FOR COLLABORATIVE EXPERTISE

Our partnership with the Center for Collaborative Expertise (CCE) commenced with a comprehensive needs assessment that utilized existing data sets. These data provided a clear indication of areas in need of improvement, as identified by the New York State Education Department. We also incorporated faculty input to understand perceived barriers to success. Through this collaborative process, we developed a focused three-year action plan aimed at addressing these challenges effectively.

### ASPIRATIONS

- To Implement a School of Best Practice
- To create a collaborative environment where both adult and student learning thrives

### ACTION ITEMS

- Create grade band teams to build community and identity
- Develop a structure to support cross functional collaboration to maximize learning for all faculty
- Provide Profession Development, Coaching, and Support Around the Following:
  - **Collaborative Expertise Teams** - Effective and Impactful PLCs
  - **Teacher Clarity** - What, Why, How
  - **Developing GRE4T Learners**- Develop students who drive their learning
  - **Grading for Impact** -Ensuring grading and feedback align
- Scale Expertise
  - Recognize and replicate success and impact
  - Empower staff to celebrate what's working and elevate the sharing examples of high impact

### FOCUS AREAS

- Improving quality of instruction in all classrooms
- Developing a robust collaborative model
- Create an environment that is highly desired as a place to work and learn
- Create ownership in building the culture by collectively co-constructing success criteria for:
  - Trust
  - Communication
  - Professionalism
  - Feedback
- Develop a Plan for Monitoring Through the Use of:
  - Instructional Walk-Throughs with feedback tools
  - Monthly data Monitoring of adult actions on learning outcomes
  - Design targeted professional learning specific to the challenge to solve

*“Our district had the incredible opportunity to partner with Dave Nagel and Bruce Potter to implement the research of Visible Learning and design a model for our Professional Learning Communities that reached heights we never imagined. Their expertise in Teacher Clarity and evidence-based strategies has profoundly transformed our educators and students. Through engaging, research-backed professional development, they helped us cultivate intentional learning environments and refine our instructional practices, leading to significant improvements in student engagement and achievement. Their tailored, interactive sessions challenged us to rethink data use and foster a culture of feedback.”*

*Dr. Dan Kalbfliesh, Superintendent*

## IMPACT

In just over two years, Heatly has truly transformed its collaborative culture. Heatly School’s commitment to collective expertise has already shown impressive outcomes. Since implementing the engagement continuum, **academic engagement has risen by 45%** in classrooms, and **4th-grade ELA proficiency scores have seen a 30% increase, outpacing the state average**. Heatly used data from instructional walk-throughs, as well as interview data reported out at the district’s monthly Ed Council meetings, as indicators for this change. By February 2024, the school had improved its standardized test scores and was reclassified under the Local Support and Improvement (LSI) model, indicating that all students were meeting performance expectations. In addition, Heatly intentionally monitored employee perception data which showed drastic improvement in how adults were embracing the changes that were needed to improve student learning outcomes.

“Prior to beginning our journey to become a certified Visible Learning school, our school was in individual survival mode. We worked in silos, maybe catching each other in the hallway with questions or concerns. Now, we are part of a team. We belong. We collaborate. We dive into data. We debate using evidence and are accountable to each other. We have time built into our schedule to meet as grade-level professional learning teams to work in real-time to provide our students with coherence, consistency, and a sense of belonging to ultimately move their learning forward and create lifelong learners. Students can’t learn if teachers aren’t learning. PLCs allowed each of us an opportunity to continue to learn and grow as educators,” said Teachers Union President, Jenny Starr.

Heatly School has officially earned the esteemed title of certified **Visible Learning Associate School**.

QUESTION	SPRING '23	SPRING '25
I look forward to coming to work every day.	56%.	93%
I am proud to tell others that I work at this school.	60%	97%
The school is aware of what goes on in the classroom.	25%	80%
The school district follows through on commitments.	40%.	80%
DEGREE TO WHICH YOU FEEL SUPPORTED		
Professional Development.	60%	87%
Student Discipline.	27%	100%
Curriculum & Instruction.	36%	87%
Supporting Students.	56%	87%

A strategic action celebrated as an innovative idea was the inclusion of the use of what the Center calls the **Collaboration Engagement Levels for Adult Learners in PLCs**. The engagement levels foster active participation in student-centered practices, providing a clearer link to increased engagement and achievement. Teachers feel valued as change agents, as demonstrated by their feedback in roundtable interviews. Empowering them to contribute to a school culture where learning from each other is the norm. This collaborative approach has proven transformative not just for immediate gains but for sustaining long-term success, underscoring that when educators are actively engaged and supported in their professional learning journey, the entire school community thrives.

Heatly’s emphasis on reflective practice has transformed PLCs into meaningful spaces for professional learning. Teachers take ownership of their growth and the team’s progress, making PLCs a driving force for sustainable development. Collaboration is now a shared responsibility, not a mandate, fostering deeper investment in each other’s success. By embedding engagement into PLCs, Heatly ensures time and resources are well spent, enhancing both educator practices and student learning. This shift underscores the power of intentional, collaborative learning, creating a culture of trust, reflection, and continuous improvement.

### DEGREES OF ENGAGEMENT

DIVISIVE	SUPPRESSING	PRESENT		CATALYZING	ACTIVATING
Derails team efforts, refuses to contribute, creates obstacles, hinders progress, and/or diminishes productivity	Hinders team learning, e.g.: Fabricates reasons to avoid current task or learning, unprepared, late, finds reasons to excuse self	Comes prepared, but is inconsistently or minimally engaged; Completes tasks but does not contribute to teams learning	Prepared, contributes thoughtfully to discussion and dialogue as well as learning	Shows commitment to improving team learning, solution-focused, pushes team toward better outcomes	Demonstrates leadership of team learning and goals, provides and seeks appropriate feedback, views challenges as opportunities for growth
INDIFFERENT		INVOLVED		ENGAGED	

### CAPACITY BUILDING FOR SUSTAINABILITY

The Center partnered with district and building leaders to implement a sustainability plan for these changes through capacity building. As part of this process, Bruce Potter supported building leaders. Nicole Ford, PLC Activator and elementary math teacher, says “Bruce Potter transformed our district by fostering clarity with everything we do. Any time there is collaborative work to be defined, we work through a process with our peers to define it by action and desired success criteria of what something means and looks like. Furthermore, he supported us in designing a system that we can monitor in real time, with tools that promote success through a common language and shared understanding. Ultimately, we were able to articulate the difference between responsibility and accountability, and have the trust and psychological safety to confront the typical issues that are barriers to the work.”



# READY TO MOVE BEYOND SURFACE-LEVEL CHANGE TO LASTING IMPACT?

## HOW WE WORK WITH SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS

### ACCESS

We collaborate with school leaders and leadership teams to identify needs and establish objectives

### COLLABORATE

We develop specific deliverable strategies aligned with your school or district priorities and structured needs

### IMPLEMENT

Our experts provide coaching, workshops, and specific actionable feedback

### EVALUATE

We collaboratively develop a plan to monitor progress, refine approaches, and empower educators to sustain growth