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# Excelsior Preparatory High School

## A Case Study of the First Three Years

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*This case study examines the leadership challenges faced by Derek Jones, a public school principal, in the first three years of his leadership of a new small high school he founded in Queens, New York.*

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This case study is designed such that it can be read from start to finish or each year can be read separately. In addition, it is divided into ten sections, each of which is accompanied by a discussion question for readers to consider before completing the section. It concludes with a series of reflection questions that refer back to the entire reading. Use the links below to access each of these sections separately.

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## Year One

When Derek Jones was first conceiving of Excelsior Preparatory High School, he didn't imagine this: By the time his new school was finally given the official go-ahead in June, the Board of Education had instituted a new rule requiring that schools like Excelsior hire at least 50 percent of their staff from the schools they were replacing.

Excelsior was conceived as one of several new small schools opening in the building that was once home to Springfield Gardens, a large school on the edge of Queens, New York. Derek, whose formative years teaching had been at Satellite Academy, an alternative "transfer" high school in Manhattan, wanted to bring the family-like atmosphere of his old school to Excelsior. Now, instead of being able to hire the best people he could find, he would have to hire his staff from among veterans and hangers-on who literally came from the "old school" mentality he was trying to replace. Derek had envisioned teachers who viewed themselves as advisors to students, who engaged students in creative student-centered lesson plans, who built a tight, small community. Would teachers from Springfield Gardens be able to do that?

Derek was uncertain, but he had already been in public education long enough to know that setbacks have to be met with a determined smile. It was June. He had two months to create his school and 80 resumes from Springfield Gardens teachers to review. With a starting teaching staff of six, he would have to hire three teachers from among those 80.

### *Hiring with One Hand Tied behind Your Back*

Diane Franco, the social worker Derek had brought with him from Satellite to help found Excelsior, flipped through the stack of resumes. There's deep experience in there, she told Derek.

He nodded, but asked one question: "Are they good?"

Diane was stumped. How would they be able to tell? Their school wasn't open yet, so there was no place for candidates to visit; no students for candidates to model a lesson with. She wasn't even sure they could get reliable references, since there was some lingering bitterness over the disappearance of Springfield Gardens. In essence, they had nothing but the interview questions to rely on.

**Discussion Question:** *What are the key challenges facing Derek? How will these be similar or different for your new school? If you were Derek, what would you ask in the interviews with Springfield Gardens teachers? What would you look for?*

Derek leaned back in his chair, collecting his thoughts. He paused, then arrived at the key thing he wanted to know: Do they love kids? It was the school's first year in existence, he noted. They had to build a culture before they could build good classrooms. "If we look for great teachers, but they have the wrong attitudes," he said, "we're ruined." On the other hand, if they were able to hire the right people with the right attitude—even if they're approach to teaching wasn't ideal—they would be on the right track. They could focus on developing instruction; it would be much harder to develop the right attitude.

Derek and Diane went into the interviews with exactly that goal: find a six-person staff with the appropriate attitude to recognize and work with students' socio-emotional challenges. Looking back on

those interviews five years later, Derek sees this decision as one of the most important things he did. Three questions were particularly effective for finding the right people:

Q. We're going to have an after-school program at Excelsior. Would you be willing to teach it?

A. While a simple yes was a start, the more hopeful responses were those in which the candidate seized this opportunity to offer a developed and enthusiastic proposal for what they would like to teach in the after-school program.

Q. What is your experience with advisory groups?

A. Derek estimates that eight of every ten teachers they interviewed had never been part of an advisory group. He treated this experience as key and rejected those who did not have it.

Q. How did you feel about advisory when you did it?

A. The right answer again was not the one-word answer. The teachers Derek hired typically offered an anecdote about helping a student through a socio-emotional issue. Derek didn't fool himself: He didn't expect lifesavers or therapists; he wanted teachers, but teachers who empathized with their students and understood that socio-emotional challenges both inside and outside school were often real obstacles to success that the school had a responsibility to recognize.

### *Greeting Resistance*

Hiring was, of course, only the beginning of creating the culture that would be critical to Excelsior's success. Derek, like many of his colleagues, notes that the first year of the school's existence is a critical time to define school culture. With a staff of just six teachers, the group was small enough that they could form a tight and cohesive team. And if he could set patterns with this small group, it could have a lasting effect on future years.

The full staff began the year in June. Within days of hiring, the team went on a four-day paid retreat that every member of the staff joined. The retreat was led by Inspiring Students to Achieve (ISA), an organization Derek had partnered with to provide professional development on assessment and instruction. Since ISA staff were facilitating, Derek got to be just "one of the gang," an effective way for him to begin getting to know his staff.

This initial time to break the ice made it easier to immediately delve into practical matters two months later when Derek asked his new staff to commit to three weeks of paid summer work before the school opened. While a portion of the three weeks was devoted to curriculum development, a task in which Derek was able to leverage the experience of teachers from Springfield Gardens, a significant chunk of the time was devoted to explicit discussion of school culture. The group discussed readings Derek and Diane had selected and received sample activities and lesson plans for advisory groups from Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR).

Since successful advisory groups were so central to Derek's vision of the school, he told the group that Diane would be leading weekly meetings throughout the year to discuss advisory. For the teachers, this was generally a relief: even though they had participated in advisories before, they had little idea how to plan one, and this gave them the reassurance that they would not be left on their own. At the same time, two or three expressed some misgivings. Sure, we've had some good experience with advisory in the past, they would say, but that's not the heart of what school is about. We're classroom teachers. Our focus should be on the classroom, not advisory groups.

This was frustrating; these same teachers had spoken enthusiastically about advisory groups in the hiring interview. In the summer planning weeks, their misgivings seemed disappear again as they engaged in conversations about how to support students and how to help them overcome socio-emotional problems. But when the school year actually began, it was a different story. Teachers didn't treat advisory the way they would other classes.

In her weekly meetings, Diane would get a mix of hostile questions and apathetic silence from skeptical teachers. She started finding lesson plans she handed out crumpled in the garbage. Four weeks into the year, she hit her breaking point.

Diane stepped into Derek's office, trembling, telling him she couldn't take it anymore. Derek saw that she was on the verge of tears. He wasn't entirely surprised: Diane was passionate about what she believed in, and was prone to be just as passionate when others didn't agree. He asked her to take a seat and tell him what happened.

She recounted recent incidents. The previous week, one of the more vocal teachers had told Diane that advisory was a "touchy-feely waste of time." This week, he and two other colleagues wandered into the meeting ten minutes before it ended. When she asked if they had implemented ideas she had shared the last week, they offered cavalier responses that they didn't have the time or that they couldn't do it. Later, she found the same lesson plan crumpled in the garbage.

**Discussion Question:** *What do you see as the issue here? What concepts are core to the mission of your own school and what reasons might teachers have for resisting them? Would you have empowered someone else to lead something so core to your school, as Derek has done with Diane? Could the teachers resistance have been avoided? If you were Derek, with Diane in your office, what would you say? What would you do next?*

The first thing Derek made clear to Diane was that he had faith in her abilities. "This school would be nothing without you," he told her. By the same token, however, the school would also be nothing without its six committed teachers. He emphasized that the whole package needs support and that they couldn't throw up their hands and give up on them. He then suggested a course of action.

First, he would start coming to the meetings Diane was facilitating. Initially, he had stayed staying away from the meetings intentionally to allow Diane to take the lead. He told her that that was not changing: He still wanted her to take the lead and facilitate the meetings, he explained, reminding her that her understanding of advisory was indispensable to the school. Derek's role would be to make it absolutely clear that this work was core to his vision of the school and that ignoring it was not an option.

Having made that decision, Derek then proceeded to offer Diane a few pointers. He told her that she needed to bring more resources to the meeting. She already had a number of books on advisories and activities that could be used in advisory. "I don't want anyone to be able to say, 'I couldn't do it,'" he told her. "I want them to have so many resources that your response will always be, 'How can I help you find another way to try it?'"

Derek didn't stop there. Knowing how important this was, he also began following up after the meetings in a variety of ways. He made sure to observe advisory classes; after advisory, he regularly asked

teachers to discuss the lessons they had taught. Within a few weeks, the meetings began to get back on track. Derek's presence and follow-up had driven home the point that skipping meetings and ignoring advisory were not options. And his weekly discussions with Diane now focused not on how frustrating the last meeting had been, but instead on the pointers he had given her and his feedback on how she had done them.

Diane continued to struggle and learn, but learning, as Derek sees it, is what happens at a school. Indeed, this was the beginning of what would be a pattern with Derek, one that he views in retrospect as central to the school's success: The message of personal empowerment that the school sought to send to students was mirrored in the message Derek sought to send to his staff. His role, as he sees it, is to foster growth in his staff, giving them the opportunity to take on leadership roles and providing as much guidance and support on leadership as he does on instruction.

### *Pushing Growth*

The first year was also the time to set up structures to support instruction. With just 100 students, the school had little additional funding to provide resources beyond the core group of teachers in the first year. Instructional leadership couldn't come from anyone except Derek and the six people who made up his faculty.

The first thing Derek focused on was building relationships. If his staff did not feel comfortable with him and with each other, then there could never be the process of open reflection and critical feedback they would need to improve what they do. The schedule had been carefully set up so that the entire teaching staff had a common planning period every day of the week. One of those days, Diane led the weekly discussion on advisory. Another day, they discussed administrative matters as a full faculty. That left three other days, as well as time after school, when teachers planned their curricula and lessons.

In these planning meetings, Derek would sometimes participate in the discussion and, more often than not, take advantage of the time to highlight one positive thing he had seen during a classroom visit. This gave him the chance to publicly recognize the strength within his faculty. Often, he would strategically select something that countered a weakness he had discussed with another staff member. If one staff member told him students would never have the persistence to complete a five-paragraph essay, he would highlight the successful work another teacher had done with students on writing and revising an essay. If one staff member told him students got nothing out of the 'All About Me' discussion in advisory, he would talk about all the insightful comments he had heard from students who engaged in the activity in another teacher's advisory group. He never called out the negative, but rather implicitly refuted it by highlighting the positive.

He also used this time to pull out staff for one-on-one meetings. With such a small faculty, he could have a one-on-one with virtually every teacher once, if not two or three times, every week. These meetings gave Derek the opportunity to routinely check in with staff, not just on their teaching, but also on their personal adjustment. It was clear to everyone that being part of a new school was a grueling experience, and everyone struggled to different degrees with managing that experience. In recognition of this, Derek would ask, How are things in life? How do you sustain yourself here? Teachers would talk of feeling more personal pressure than they had in their old school, where they were more easily lost in a much larger staff. I don't know that I'm up to this, they would tell him. I feel like I'm trying to do so much and I can't stay on top of it.

But Derek wasn't so worried that his staff couldn't stay on top of their responsibilities; he was more worried about how to help his staff not worry. Look, this isn't going to be easy, he would tell them,

reassuringly. We all need to support each other, but even so, we're each going to mess up at times. I give you permission to make mistakes. In fact, I demand that you make mistakes. But one thing you won't do is fail. As long as you're trying and thinking about it, you aren't failing.

Derek's vocal reminders of his confidence in his staff and his faith in their ability to overcome hurdles helped create an atmosphere where teachers were increasingly open to sharing their perspective and their concerns. This was coupled with regular visits to classrooms: In a school of just 100 kids, Derek was able to visit every classroom on a regular basis, being sure to provide some feedback to the teacher the same day—the same period if possible—and following up with an informal one-on-one debriefing within the next day.

**Discussion Question:** *What elements of Derek's style and approach seem most important to creating a cohesive culture? Do you think your own style matches Derek's? If not, what things would you intentionally try to do the same way? What would you try to do differently? What do you see as most important to creating a strong culture?*

### **Reflection Letters**

When January came, Derek asked every staff member to write a reflection letter, describing their successes and challenges to date. (Later, he would ask for a similar letter at the end of the year.) They read these to him in a one-on-one meeting.

Derek wasn't so naïve to think that every staff member shared all their concerns openly with him in these letters. He inevitably heard his fill of offhand comments one teacher would make about another in private, or explicit concerns they would raise in one-on-one meetings. Ever since you asked me to lead the development of rubrics, one teacher would tell him, a few teachers have gotten really petty and say you play favorites. Another lowered her voice to a whisper in the middle of a meeting to tell him that a colleague repeatedly complained that Derek kept taking the students' side in disputes.

Then there was the time Diane told him about a couple teachers who were getting obsessed with the idea that he was too weak a leader. "They say you're inconsistent and you're changing things too often, that you'll treat different students and different teachers differently depending on the heat of the moment."

The last criticism surprised Derek a little. That kind of individual empathy was, he insisted, exactly what lay at the heart of Excelsior! But apparently for some teachers, it was what lay at the heart of a weak leader.

At the same time as he asked staff to write their reflection letters to him, Derek had decided that he was going to write his own reflection letter, which he would send around to staff and read individually in his one-on-one meetings with each of them, to model and mirror what he had asked them to do for him. There were many concerns that had never been stated to him openly but that he knew were fomenting on staff. He wondered whether he should address them in his public letter.

**Discussion Question:** *What do you think of the idea of having staff write reflection letters? What do you see as the benefits and possible risks? If you were writing a reflection letter to staff as Derek is, would you address any of the concerns he has heard: that you play favorites, that you take the students' side over the adults, that you are a weak leader for responding to different situations differently? If you would address some but not others, how would you decide which ones? What would you say? Reading on, what do you think of Derek's responses?*

Derek decided to address each issue slightly differently. The idea that he played favorites was, as the teacher who voiced it to him had said, petty. He sought to empower his teachers and those who stepped up were given more opportunities for leadership. If this was playing favorites, so be it. Addressing it would do nothing to help the school. He did not even mention this in the letter at all, so as not to give voice to it.

The idea that he took students' side over adults had more than a grain of truth to it. In fact, as he thought about it, this was a grain of truth that he wanted teachers to understand and adopt. But to do so, they would need to think about it differently. In his reflection letter, he wrote about how he routinely weighed the balance between parents, teachers, and students in each decision. He tried to write out some of his thought process for deciding what to do when different people in that balance had different needs and how to work together to serve students.

The accusation that he was a weak leader was the one that required the most careful thought. He felt it was important to surface this—he couldn't have people questioning his leadership. But he saw their point. He was a little inconsistent at times, and he could see that that could make people uneasy. Derek realized that in order to address the issue, he had to separate it into three different pieces:

He shared, frankly and self-critically, that at times he was too inconsistent, stating outright that this is something he would work to change.

He shared that at times he acted more out of empathy than in lockstep with a clearly written rule and admitted that this might be confusing at times. This, he said, would not change. Without ever noting that he had heard people equate this to weak leadership, he simply did the opposite: he wrote about how he equated this kind of human compassion with strong leadership.

Finally, he wrote about the fact that he had taken different courses of action when it came to responding to behavioral issues with different students. This, he said, was part of the consistent discipline policy of the school, which everyone should be following: to stay true to a set of core beliefs about school values, but differentiate how you realize those values, treating each student as an individual and determining discipline on a case-by-case basis.

## Year Two

Entering the summer of 2005, Derek Jones was feeling good about Excelsior Prep. The school he founded had completed its first year with good student results and a strong, cohesive team. Now it was time to add another grade and another 100 students. Hiring would be easier this year than in the first year. Now there was a school candidates could visit and classrooms in which they could give mock



lessons. Most of all, with a change in regulations, now Derek had the leeway to hire whomever he wanted.

But just when he thought he had all that leeway, he received a letter from the union. As far as he could tell, it was a form letter, automatically generated for any school with a staff predominantly representing one race. Derek's staff in its first year was, in fact, entirely African American: from Derek to Diane to every last teacher. This was not something he had done intentionally, but it was nonetheless the reality. The union form letter informed him in no uncertain terms that, because more than 90 percent of his staff was of the same racial background, he was expected to seek greater diversity on his staff in hiring in the future. Derek took mental note of the letter, but paid it little heed: simple laws of probability made it almost inevitable that his staff would become more diverse. He would never even need to mention what he saw as a misplaced concern from the union.

With that behind him, Derek decided to take the leeway he had in hiring and hand it over to everyone else: He invited the entire staff to join him on the hiring committee. After teachers reviewed candidates, they would be reviewed by a second committee comprised of three students and three parents from the School Leadership Team.

Involving so many people in hiring brought its risks. At times, there were long, vocal debates about candidates. As much as teachers had discussed the school philosophy in the first year, there was still ample room for disagreement. However, among the six teachers, three to four clearly agreed with and understood Derek's overall vision for the school. Derek chose to put his confidence in the fact that that group would be able to overrule views that were inconsistent with the school vision. Since Derek was part of the committee, his was also one of the voices that were heard, and while he was careful not to be overbearing, he nonetheless did not hesitate to interject his own viewpoint into the discussion. Meanwhile, the experience helped the entire staff to express their values for the school and thereby gain better insight into each other's thinking.

### ***Racial Profiling?***

As the hiring process progressed, one teacher on the committee grumbled. At one time, halfway between joking and serious, suggesting that the process was rigged and Derek had simply plucked the candidates he wanted and his "gang" had supported him.

As the school year began, the same teacher started raising another concern. The staff the team hired this year, was, as Derek assumed it would be, more diverse than in the first year—a mix of black and white hires. The founding teacher highlighted this fact at a full-staff meeting, noting pointedly "how the complexion of the staff has changed." As she said this, several of her colleagues who had been at the school since the first year nodded their heads in agreement.

Derek bristled. Part of him thought that this was just petty complaining that arises now and then. If so, he thought his best approach would be to simply ignore it. But seeing how other teachers from the founding group nodded in agreement, he worried that it could be far more serious than that—though he wondered what exactly triggered their unease.

***Discussion Question:*** *As your second school year begins, your founding group of teachers begins to raise a concern around racism in selection of the second-year staff. What issues are involved? What would you do in response?*

Derek's first response was swift and certain, but perhaps unexpected. In the newsletter that week, he announced a new school policy: "First Fridays." On the first Friday of every month, all staff members were invited to a happy hour after work. Derek proceeded to personally invite each staff member, prodding some more than others, particularly some of the white teachers whom he had noted seemed a little uncomfortable at that pivotal staff meeting. When the inaugural First Friday arrived, everyone came. Derek again played a role in encouraging staff to mingle with one another, avoiding the formation of cliques of founding teachers and new hires, or black teachers and white teachers.

This was part of a two-pronged strategy. The first prong: Help staff get to know one another. The founding staff felt a tight bond that grew out of being such a small group engaged in such a large undertaking. But in the second year, there were fewer occasions for everyone to get together, and so they didn't. "First Friday," along with a holiday party by the time December rolled around, encouraged everyone to socialize, making it easier to see beyond white faces and black faces to the humans behind them.

The second prong was to raise the issue directly. It was not, however, the issue of racism that Derek decided to confront, but one he saw lurking behind it: a divide between founding staff and new hires. As always, his approach was to do this by accenting the possibility of the positive rather than noting the negative.

At the next full-staff meeting he noted that, though they were just a few months into the year, they had been seeing new students experience difficulty getting comfortable in the school's environment. "I'm looking for ideas," he said, and asked for ways to help both new staff and students acclimate to the school. After a brief silence and a few hesitant suggestions, a conversation began rolling and everyone was offering ideas, with the focus starting on new students and progressively moving to new staff. Soon enough, the staff was a united group thinking about how to help each other, instead of a divided group questioning motives.

### *Double the Size, without Halving the Effectiveness*

First Fridays weren't the only approach Derek employed to try to foster community in the second year. Derek's practice in the first year of meeting with each teacher one-on-one as many as three times a week, a level of interaction that was critical to initially forming a strong culture at the school, was untenable in the second year with twice the staff. Instead, he instead relied on the strength of those relationships along with a little more structure to keep collaboration at the heart of the school.

The schedule was designed so that every teacher was free for the same planning period every day. Now, however, more structure was woven into those meetings. Mondays were full-staff meetings; Tuesdays grade-team meetings; Wednesdays advisory planning; Thursdays subject-area meetings; and Fridays open time to work with students.

As the school grew, each grade and subject area selected a teacher to serve as the leader of their team, a job that Derek asked the teachers to appoint among themselves, emphasizing his trust and respect for their decisions. In general, founding teachers were more likely to become leaders. Derek didn't fight this tendency. Rather, he encouraged these teachers to have the same kind of one-on-one meetings with their colleagues that he had modeled with them in the first year, asking them how it was going and providing coaching when they ran into roadblocks. In this way, one-on-one relationships continued to be central to the cohesive team thinking that had made the first year so successful, but instead of Derek taking all of these on himself, he coached and guided a group of founding teachers to do so.

The reflection letters that Derek had initiated in the first year continued as a ritual in the second, and Derek used time during state exam week at the end of each semester to schedule 30- to 45-minute meetings with each teacher to review each of their letters and his letter together and, in so doing, to maintain the one-on-one relationship and mutual respect.

## Year Three

As Excelsior Prep entered its third year, expanding now to 11<sup>th</sup> grade and adding another 100 students, Principal Derek Jones and his staff had much under their belts. The culture they had established was strong enough that students came in knowing what to expect. With virtually no staff turnover and a high degree of consistency from routine staff collaboration, the school climate was one of evenness and reliability. Staff could focus on helping students; students could focus on learning.

The fact that they were empowered, however, did not mean that Derek's teachers had mastered the art of teaching. The approaches Derek typically took to helping teachers improve instruction—debriefing with staff quickly after observations, publicly highlighting good practices within the school, and suggesting that staff visit colleagues to see specific practices—continued. But the greatest school-wide push for instructional growth came from the work of a team charged not with improving instruction, but rather with better understanding student challenges so that improved instruction could follow. This occurred through the creation of a Data Team.

### *Creating a Data Team*

While Derek had always been giving feedback to staff through observations, it was in its third year that the school began to take a more systematic and differentiated approach to analyzing data on student struggles and devising strategies to help them.

Early in the year, Tori Raysor, the special education teacher, suggested that the school focus on how to help students with Individualized Education Plans, with the assumption that what worked for these students would probably benefit many others in the building. Tori's suggestion coincided with a new pilot program in New York called Children's First Intensive (CFI), in which schools would be required to collect data on a small group of struggling students in the school and test strategies to help them. Derek suggested that Tori's idea form the basis of Excelsior's CFI program, and the effort was off the ground.

**Discussion Question:** *You are creating a team at your school to explore data on struggling students with IEP's. How do you structure the team? Who will lead it? Who will participate? What issues are involved in these decisions?*

Derek knew from the start that he, as principal, would not lead the team—it was far more important to him to build and distribute leadership among his staff. However, he and his Assistant Principal would both participate so that they could take insights from the group and assure them that they were being heard by leadership.

Derek asked Tori to lead the team. As the special education teacher, Tori knew the population they would be studying. At the same time, her role as special education teacher meant that her time in classrooms was more flexible than that of other teachers. Derek then opened up participation to other interested teachers and ended up, with a little careful encouragement on his part, getting one teacher from each subject area on the team. To ensure they felt invested in the commitment and took it seriously, he required a written application from each teacher who wanted to participate.

### *Engaging in Action Research*

Derek sat down with Tori to lay out the plan for the group. Almost immediately, she began suggesting ways that they could try out strategies that she had used at her previous school, where she had also been a special education teacher. At this, Derek pulled her back, explaining that they couldn't jump directly into strategies but should first try to better understand the students. "Once we understand the struggles better, we can match the strategies with the struggles," he explained. With that clarified, Tori jumped back into the idea of how the group could proceed. Derek suggested she map out a plan for the meetings and get him an initial agenda. He reviewed it, gave her a little feedback, and she was ready to go.

The first meeting of the group brought the first challenge for Tori. When she announced that they would start by narrowing down from the 55 students at the school with IEP's to 15 that they would study in depth, she received a host of suggestions.

One teacher suggested reviewing past test scores. Another, that they interview students. One suggested that they focus on 15 students who were enrolled in their classes. Another raised the idea of a controlled study with a comparison group for research purposes.

***Discussion Question:*** *What do you think of the various suggestions from the teachers? How would you want Tori to proceed in response? Moving further along in the work of the data team, how would you support Tori? What qualities would you want Tori to have if she is to lead the team effectively?*

On weighing these suggestions, Tori pushed for one in particular: that they select students enrolled in their classes, and not spend more time trying to select the "perfect" sample. The interesting part of the work, she emphasized, would be learning about the students and trying strategies to help them. They shouldn't get bogged down in a complicated process just to choose the students to study. After some discussion, the rest of the group agreed.

This approach proved invaluable to the team's progress. With a little encouragement and feedback from Derek, Tori was able to keep them focused on the goal of using data on struggling students to try out new instructional strategies—not to conduct a thorough research project or to verifiably identify the students who are struggling more than any other students. As a result, they were able to move from research to action quickly.

This was not the only thing that Tori did to help the group move forward. She was extremely well organized, mapping out an agenda that included specific steps that were clear and small enough for people to accomplish in the next week, and consistently holding them to it. For next week, everybody needs to visit two students' classrooms and collect notes on exactly what you observe the students doing. Tell me who in the group you'll observe and when. Another week she would bring transcripts and report

cards: Review these before the next meeting so that we can have a good discussion of what we see next time. Another week was dedicated to faculty discussions of the 15 focus students in subject-area meetings.

It wasn't only Tori's skill that made this possible. Derek made sure to support her, not only through his presence and his feedback on agendas, but also by recognizing the time needed. He reduced her teaching load by one class, permitted her to use one planning meeting each week to work exclusively on the team, and paid her per-session for additional time. He found that giving one person one central responsibility outside the classroom for the year (rather than giving several smaller responsibilities spread out among more people) was an effective way to get the work done, and one he replicated with other efforts.

### *From Analysis to Action*

Before Thanksgiving rolled around, the team was itching to try out strategies in the classroom. Having looked at various pieces of data, and then reviewed notes to look for repeated themes and patterns, two things consistently came up: the students were struggling with research and analytic writing.

The four teachers on the CFI team agreed that before they could try strategies, they needed to have a clear way to measure student progress. This was another point on which there were a variety of opinions. One teacher suggested compiling numeric scores using rubrics and tracking them over time. Others objected that this was too complicated and that they should instead continue with the same observations and teacher viewpoints they had begun collecting. Objecting to this as simply more of the same, still others suggested looking at student work. This too raised objections; some questioned whether any of this really was data, since it didn't yield any numbers that could be charted and graphed.

These kinds of disagreements weren't uncommon. This was a group that knew how to voice their opinions but also to listen to one another. When there were many disparate opinions, Derek's voice could be an influential one. And he had a definitive opinion on this.

***Discussion Question:*** *A team of teachers has collected data on a small group of struggling students. Some want to delve deeper into the same set of data. Others want to begin a more systematic approach to get quantifiable data to track growth. Still others want to use student work to look at growth. What are the key issues involved? What would you do?*

Derek chose this moment to interject his own opinion. He began by validating some of the points the teachers had made. They had indeed gathered valuable data already through observations and discussions with teachers, but doing more of the same risked draining momentum. And they could indeed benefit from systematic collection of quantitative data, but this option might take a significant amount of time to plan out at this early stage. Instead, he suggested that they get started trying strategies in the classroom and use student work as a way of getting a sense of the impact of those strategies.

There was more time for discussion, but Derek's voice, which he raised only at opportune moments, did have its influence and the group saw his reasoning. Soon they had agreed to move forward trying strategies and collecting student work.

The samples they had already collected—some from the beginning of the year, some from the prior year when students were putting together portfolios—gave them writing samples and, in most cases, a reflection of students’ research skills. A number of meetings were spent discussing how they would assign research papers and analytic writing in their own classrooms, with each of the teachers on the team creating and sharing a rubric they would use to assess the quality of the work. In addition, Tori brought sample activities, worksheets, graphic organizers, and other materials from her prior work in special education to serve as strategies teachers could try. The teachers decided they would use one consistent graphic organizer for assignments in analytic writing as well as a worksheet designed to assist in the development of research skills.

After that, the team meetings began to look different. They entered a phase where the data they were reviewing no longer included transcripts and observations, but instead focused solely on student work. Each week, a teacher would talk about a strategy they had tried—perhaps they had introduced the graphic organizer, or perhaps they had asked students to do research on-line—and how they thought it went. They would also bring sample student work from a research or analytic writing assignment to discuss what they saw.

### *Sharing Conclusions from Action Research*

As May approached, Tori shifted gears once again, focusing on how the group could make comparisons between work from the beginning and end of the year to draw some conclusion about the strategies they had tried.

The final meetings of the group consisted of reviewing student work from old assignments, which served as baseline assignments, and comparing them to the students’ most recent work. Using the rubrics they had shared with each other, they were able to identify specific areas in which students’ skill had clearly improved: the ability to identify appropriate sources of research, for example, or the ability to write a paragraph with a thesis statement and relevant supporting details.

By the end of the year, the data team had a few clear and potent messages about how they had been able to improve students’ research and analytic writing skills. Everyone agreed that the lessons they had learned did not apply only to the 15 students they were studying, or even to the 55 students with IEP’s, but rather to just about every student in the school. Add to this the fact that they had been analyzing the data very publicly throughout the year—including discussions with every teacher in the school during subject-area meetings—and it was easy for them to communicate their findings to their colleagues. While the students’ struggle was news to no one, the expertise that the data team felt they had developed through their intense study of it was. The next year, they would look not just at their own classrooms, but at the implementation of the graphic organizers and rubrics for research and analytic writing throughout the school.

**Discussion Question:** *What do you view as the successful steps the Data Team took throughout the year? What would you have done differently? What challenges might have arisen at different stages with a different group of teachers? If teachers had been less willing to change their assignments or develop rubrics during the year, how would you respond?*

## Epilogue

At the time this case study was written, Excelsior Preparatory was entering its sixth year with Derek Jones at the helm. A variety of measures show the school doing an outstanding job. On its New York City Progress Report, it received a grade of A overall, and A in every category. On its Department of Education's Quality Review, it received the highest mark of "well developed" overall as well as in every category. And in five years, the school has seen only three staff members leave, leading to the strong, cohesive, consistent team that Derek notes as central to the school's success.

Despite this success, the school and its leader are, it seems, never satisfied. After a few alumni reported that they had had to take remedial math classes when they enrolled in the local college, the data team began a full-year study of the math curriculum. The new study is being driven by teachers, as are various other initiatives: Two teachers have taken the lead on projects to create four-year curriculum maps that trace learning from entry to exit. A third has developed a collaborative teaching component being implemented throughout the school. Six teachers are participating in a program through which they will get their administrative certification by tackling problems in the school, a program Derek formed in partnership with a nearby university.

"When we started," Derek says, "the question I would keep asking myself was, 'How do I help my staff grow?' Along the way, when I found that there were dissenters, I had to learn not to take it personally and instead ask, 'How can their different perspectives help me grow?' Now as we go into our sixth year, everyone is asking, 'How do we make this school grow?'"

### Reflection Questions

1. Derek regularly credits the strength of his team for the success of his school. What about his style and approach do you think most contributed to building a strong team? In what ways is your own style similar to or different from his?
2. Derek places significant emphasis on transparency with his staff. There are times, however, that this can backfire. What risks do you see in encouraging staff to reflect both personally and professionally? How would you address these risks? When is transparency appropriate?
3. A constant challenge for urban principals is that of encouraging staff to think about how they serve all children, not just the ones that are easiest to reach. What do you see in Derek's approach that helps accomplish this?
4. The transition from first to second year got off to a bumpy start for Derek. What do you see as some key challenges? How can you effectively prepare ahead for this transition?
5. In what ways do you think Derek treated the first year at Excelsior Preparatory differently from successive years as a way of laying a solid foundation for the future? How do you envision laying this foundation in your first year?
6. What elements of the school's approach to studying data in its third year were most effective? What risks and pitfalls have you seen in similar efforts at other schools? What would you have done differently?