A few years after it opened in 2009, Chicago Bulls College Prep hit a plateau. The high school on the Near West Side of Chicago had positive results—the culture was set, teachers had established good classroom management—but students weren’t growing in the ways they needed to, if they were to compete at top universities and graduate. “The problem was us. We were the ones who were in the way. We weren’t asking enough of kids because we were still doing too much for them,” says 2015 Ryan Award winner Tyson Kane, the founding principal of Chicago Bulls. So the former consultant, who was accustomed to brainstorming and fixing problems in the corporate world, put a fresh set of eyes to the challenge before him. He started reimagining how learning could happen.

Time always seemed like the biggest challenge for teachers. With four short years of high school, and 70-minute class periods, teachers often would lament that they didn’t have enough time to cover all the ground they needed to cover to close the achievement gap. But Kane came to view that assumption as flawed. “What it’s doing is saying, ‘You’re the fount of knowledge and the kids can’t learn without you.’ If we actually taught them how to learn without us, we would solve the time problem and it wouldn’t be only 70 minutes a day they were learning math, it would be four hours a day because they could teach each other,” he says. “If we would focus more on training young people to educate themselves and the ways and dynamics that can occur, as opposed to delivering content, we would solve this rigor issue.”

Kane looked to the top-performing high schools in the nation for inspiration, traveling to the elite.

### Transformational Leaders

#### GET IT
Understand all the challenges and complexities of leading in a historically underperforming, under-resourced school and neighborhood.

#### STRATEGIC THINKING AND PLANNING
Are goal-oriented with the ability to prioritize, while creating strong systems, structures, and processes within the school that are efficient and effective.

#### COMMUNICATION
Effectively communicate to a wide variety of audiences (parents, students, staff, etc.) in both verbal and written format.

#### INSTRUCTION
Possess a clear understanding of the learning standards and effective teaching practice.

#### RELATIONSHIP BUILDING
Build trust and loyalty amongst entire staff; operate with candor and transparency; leverage their strengths and emotional intelligence.

#### RESILIENCE
Demonstrate persevering through challenges with a focus on the original goal.

#### PROFESSIONALISM
Display professionalism and maturity by meeting all deadlines and exhibiting behavior, communication, and body language that is consistently respectful and positive.

#### COACHABILITY
Exhibit self-awareness and openness to discuss their own strengths and weaknesses, and implement action steps that lead to growth.

#### CONFIDENCE
Stand up for beliefs and have the ability to make important decisions, even when unpopular; the leader’s presence exudes a perfect balance of confidence and humility.
prep schools. “I fully expected to walk in and it was going to be really fancy and wonderful,” Kane recalls. But inside he was taken aback by the simplicity: Just kids sitting around a wooden table talking to each other. No fancy technology, just a chalkboard on the wall.

But to transplant this student-led discussion model to an economically disadvantaged student body in Chicago, he’d have to overcome some obstacles, as the students arrive to school from culturally different worlds. “We knew we’d have to explicitly teach some of the different cultural things that would cause them to be successful in terms of being able to learn from each other,” Kane says. Chicago Bulls students would need to learn to talk to people and pull knowledge out of them. “That’s a whole basket of values and confidence and self-awareness,” Kane says. “Do I understand enough about my own ability and do I have the fear to be wrong? How do I access information when I don’t know the right answer—not just in terms of looking it up in a book—but my comfort in approaching somebody and how I speak to them and the way that I come across and do I insult people, and so on. It’s a whole basket of cultural implications, especially for a teenager.”

And Kane didn’t have a private school budget to create the 15:1 student-teacher class ratios he saw in those schools. He would have to figure out how to implement the model with one teacher leading classes of 25 to 35 kids. “So you have to create a design where the teacher is actually irrelevant and the kids can teach themselves, literally, so the teacher doesn’t have to be at the table,” he says. The questions asked in that kind of classroom are different than what’s the answer to 5 + 6. It’s examining what happened in the discussion, who spoke first and why, what dynamic occurred after that first person spoke and what was the tone. “It’s a very different kind of teaching than explicitly just saying, ‘Raise your hand and give me the answer.’ It teaches me to become empowered as a kid to know and access the people dynamic,” Kane says. That ability to communicate and extract information sets up kids to be successful in college

### MEET TYSON KANE

He’s a former corporate turnaround consultant who can also breakdance.

A Texas native, Kane earned his degree from the University of Texas, then went to work in investment banking. He transitioned into management consulting at Boston Consulting Group, then joined the Carlyle Group private equity firm in its Dallas turnaround division. Along with his team, he’d help create business plans for the company’s new acquisitions then go to work implementing those plans, often in Europe, for six months to a year. “That’s what I wanted to do—go roll up my sleeves and get some work done,” he says. “I really enjoyed the work, but I wanted to try to contribute socially.” He started volunteering for KIPP in Texas, helping with operations and finance. But he kept finding himself wandering into the classroom—so much so that he decided to make the career change and sign up for Teach for America. He worked at a high school in Los Angeles and loved teaching, but felt like his prior career experience could help him tackle some of the big challenges in urban schools. “I wanted to have an opportunity to kind of meld both worlds,” he says. When he learned about Noble, he was drawn to its focus on results. “You have the latitude to do what you think is necessary. Just get results. I said nobody in education talks that way. That’s the world I come from—pure meritocracy. Sign me up for that,” Kane says.

He became an assistant principal at Noble’s Golder campus before founding Chicago Bulls in 2009.

In addition to becoming head of schools at Noble, there’s one more title Kane’s recently added to his resume: social media sensation. Video of Kane breakdancing for his students at a school rally was shared thousands of times in the spring of 2016 and led to local news stories. It’s not the first time he’s danced for his students, believing in exemplifying one of the school’s mottos: “No fear, no embarrassment.”
and the workplace. And while students need a lot of practice to get it right, it’s something most schools, and not even most universities, teach. “More often, you get to your workplace and only then do people start trying to figure it out there. I don’t know why we don’t spend time doing it in schools. But that’s the key to rigor.”

If he was to be the architect of such a shift for Chicago Bulls, Kane would need to understand this rigorous model inside and out. He started experimenting with these ideas in his own classroom. (He tries to teach at least one class a year when possible.) “If I can’t do it, you shouldn’t listen to me,” he jokes. “I wanted a course where I could technically not even have to show up anymore and all the kids would pass the AP calculus exam.” As more teachers adopted the new model, the staff started to see results and noticed the empowering effect on students.

The focus on rigor has been central to Chicago Bulls’ school identity as it has risen to the top of Chicago’s high schools. A full 100 percent of Bulls graduates have been accepted to four-year universities, including Harvard, Northwestern and the University of Chicago. In 2015, the average ACT score for Chicago Bulls students ranked it in the top 10 of the city—a list that is dominated by selective-enrollment schools. With his success at Chicago Bulls, Noble tapped Kane to serve as the head of schools for its growing charter school network in Chicago. This case study serves as a primer for how Kane went about turning traditional ideas about urban education upside down.

When Kane started Chicago Bulls, the vision was simple: build a strong foundation through consistent discipline and culture with the right staff in the building. But his eye was on greatness from the get-go. He pitched his vision to potential members of his team as, “We don’t even know where it will go, but we’re trying to create something that might be the best anyone’s ever seen. Come along, let’s have some fun.”

Kane knew staff members would need to be empowered with “the right freedom and creativity and ownership and entrepreneurial nature,” Kane says. “To be able to put your fingerprint on something and say, ‘I made this and it’s mine.’” While he wanted to give teachers freedom with how they went about their craft, he also wanted to align them around a few key priorities. As Kane describes it: “You build whatever house you want, but please build it on this foundation. Don’t go pour your own.”

The leader must decide which elements of the plan are required and which are optional. “These 5 tenets must be, and everything else is your flavor, your style, your show, however you want to do it,” he says.

School leaders also must be self-disciplined to remain focused on the right priorities over time. “Bad leaders will lose that self-discipline. They will sit in their office, or they will be out of touch, or they won’t put themselves in uncomfortable

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**Change Management**

**OBJECTIVE**

Strategic planning is used to guide change management with an 80/20 focus.

**DRIVERS:**

- The main goal for the school and the plan to accomplish the goal have been clearly articulated.
- The entire staff is bought into the mission and vision for the school.
- Progress towards goals is monitored to determine effectiveness of strategies.
- Course correction occurs as necessary to ensure that the most effective plan and strategies are implemented.
- Staff time is appropriately focused on the annual goals and the key strategies, while managing urgent matters effectively.

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positions to help understand what really is needed in their organization,” he says. But how do you determine what the right priorities are? Kane does a lot of talking—and more importantly, listening—with his crew. He schedules time to “schedule his time.” That is, he blocks off specific time to go around and talk to people, seek out ideas, take stock of what’s going on. It can be easy to get caught up in all the meetings and work, because the task at hand is so urgent, but Kane says it’s important to step back and make sure the focus is correct. “I believe in smelling the roses, in taking the time to walk around and have those conversations and think about what you need to do next and get as many people’s thoughts on how to do that as you can,” he says. Leaders can create reliable structures to gather that input on a more consistent basis, such as through a team of leaders. “I believe very much in that philosophy—pushing the decision-making to the person who’s actually doing the work,” he says.

As the first building blocks solidified, the school saw strong growth on the ACT and had the right cultural pieces in place. But, would it be enough to get the students not only to enter college, but to graduate? “If you think about ACT score growth, most kids come in, on average, in CPS (Chicago Public Schools) at 14,” Kane says. “If you hit a 21, your predicted probability to graduate from college is probably around 50 percent, maybe even in the upper 40s. That’s the national average for graduation for students who enter with a 21 ACT,” Kane says. Schools are focused on how quickly to move students from 14 to 21. But Kane and his staff started thinking bigger. What if they could improve their students’ chances of graduating college by getting 10 or 12 points of growth? “We had to rethink the structures. Clearly if you just keep doing what you’re doing a little bit better, it’s going to be only incremental improvement. We had to fundamentally think about what if we had a total redesign from the ground up, of how we approach class and how we think about rigor and the kids’ experience,” Kane says.

The leaders also wanted as many Chicago Bulls kids to graduate from college as those from privileged backgrounds. “Those are the people who shape the world, and Chicago Bulls kids need to be in the room with those people,” Kane says. He wanted his staff to insist on even higher expectations for the kids to make sure they had a full understanding of the subject matter at hand, to demand high-quality student work always and to increase student motivation and investment. He codified his thinking about how to increase rigor into a 39-page guide called “The Spark,” infusing it with humor and inspiration alongside vivid and practical examples of how to pivot to a school where the students were in charge of their learning and where teachers were silent as kids debated tough questions and deepened their understanding.

“The Spark” identifies the three specific levers that would move the school to true greatness: higher academic rigor, improved student-to-student leadership and mentorship, and parent-peer support. But he cautioned that the school couldn’t tackle all goals at once. The staff would be “focusing on less, doing it better, and sharpening our ability to predict the future.” The themes for that first year were rigor and simplicity.

Wendy Erskine, former assistant principal and now principal, says Kane makes it clear that leadership needs to stick to the simple priorities. “If it doesn’t fit under those three things, that’s not to say that I don’t care about them, they’re just not top-of-mind for me at the moment,” Erskine says.
From that starting point, Kane drafted professional development around the new model, then enrolled those teachers who were incorporating it well in their classrooms to teach other staff members. “We went from a couple people dabbling in it, to about a third of the school doing it, to now 100 percent of the classes are what we call performance-based.”

But this kind of transition is not one made overnight. Kane estimates he took two years making the case for it, learning it first himself so he had a legitimacy from which to speak, before involving everyone. When Kane started talking to teachers about majorly revamping the way their classrooms were run, teacher Kelli Segerson says the reasons for the change were made clear. “He was always showing the way and not just telling you the way to go,” she says. When speaking, it’s not unusual for him to organize his thoughts into lists, which helps make clear to the staff the steps to take toward his vision. “And we were kind of all in the shift together,” she says. Segerson had been experimenting with the discussion-based model here and there, but when she fully embraced it, she learned a lot quickly. “I messed up a bunch of times, but the end result just feels so much better,” she says.

Kane also identified metrics that would define expected performance for the staff. With those in place to help teachers understand how to measure success, he established structures to make sure there was accountability to those metrics.

And it worked. “We saw growth that we’d never seen before in certain areas,” Kane says. The school had been in the top five for the city in terms of growth before this shift. Under the new model, some classes saw a five-point gain in a single year, he says. AP class pass rates rose significantly. “The real exciting thought was the systemic effect of this, because teaching in the first year was kind of tough, but if I’ve been part of this for three years as a freshman, sophomore, junior, with all my classes, can you imagine? Being a junior or senior and you’ve been a part of a program like this for three years and all your courses are a discussion-based model?” Kane says. As students and staff became more enrolled in the vision and accustomed to the ways, things started to snowball. “Now the expectation is the trajectory should continue to be higher,” he says.

High-Performing Team

**OBJECTIVE**

The team is committed to the vision, strategies, and tactics to accomplish the goals.

**DRIVERS:**

- Staff expectations and non-negotiables are clear.
- Staff is bought into the vision of the school and is free of blockers or resistors.
- A hiring process is conducted with clear alignment to staff expectations and non-negotiables and the school is staffed to meet the needs of the students.
- Onboarding and development of staff is systematic, fosters buy-in and trust, and results in high levels of teacher retention.
- Teachers are celebrated for their accomplishments and progress toward school goals.
- Performance levels are communicated directly and promptly to all staff.
- Staff is consistently held accountable to job expectations.

Dan Kuzma recalls being a bit taken aback by his interview with Kane. Instead of the usual principal interview questions, Kane threw him two logic questions that had nothing to do with his content area, or really to do with education. “He looks to see how you figure out the problem and what your response is and how analytical or logical your response is,” says Kuzma, who is a chemistry teacher and dean.
Kane concedes that he’s discovered it better to examine how people answer questions, as opposed to the substance of their answer. “I started out thinking very rigidly, ‘They have to say this and say that,’” he says. “It became much more holistic. I’m looking much more at the capacity of the person as opposed to their current status.”

On his must-have list for potential hires: a person he can trust, who is smart and wants to be part of figuring out the answer, not just following orders. “The industry of education is very different than any industry I’ve worked in before. It’s a low-trust industry,” Kane says. “It always seems really strange to me that teachers are treated as people who couldn’t inherently be trusted.” He aims to give that trust back to teachers. He seeks people who respond well in environments where high autonomy is coupled with high accountability. “I can’t hold people accountable for performance or results if I don’t give them the power or latitude to be able to do what they need to do to generate those results,” Kane says. “You’re hired because you’re smart. We want you to use your brain.”

Empowering people to be who they want to be leads to a better result for everyone involved. “Your higher-performing people stay and want to be part of that organization rather than being told what to do all the time,” he says.

The leadership team has tried to strike the right balance in terms of how much structure to provide so staff know how to do their jobs, but not overprescribing to such an extent as to stifle creativity and other skills. Wendy Erskine, Kane’s assistant principal who took over as principal, says she manages to the higher performers in the building. “You don’t create rules and do things just because you’re trying to prevent someone from doing things,” she says. The solution is to provide room to innovate, while putting the basic rules in place to preserve the strong foundation and tend to the strong culture. The school budgeting policy is an example. Each teacher is given his or her own budget, to make decisions about which textbooks are necessary, and which other supplies and resources the students need. “I don’t want to look at the purchase order and be able to tell you whether or not you need those books at all. You manage your budget,” Erskine says. That approach resonates with the high performer, who will figure out ways to stretch the dollars and best use them. “I can basically tell you go get a great result. My job is to remove all the obstacles that exist in your path to getting a great result,” Erskine says. “That’s why we call ourselves a support team, we don’t call ourselves administrators.”

Tyson Kane also takes time to coach the school’s soccer team, recently guiding them to a championship in 2014—their third straight championship year.

But while there is latitude, 100 percent consistency is required when it comes to culture. “If kids feel they can go from one classroom to another and the expectation is different, they will take advantage of that,” Erskine says. “If every classroom you walk in, the ‘Do Now’ is always silent, we begin right at the bell, and you’re late if you’re not seated at the bell, and I get a consequence every single time for being late, then the hallways clear out probably two to three minutes before the actual bell rings; kids are sitting down calmly ready to work at the bell, because that’s just the expectation enforced across the entire building.” With the large size of the school—at 1,100 students—if the staff is going to be able to scale the culture and sustain it, teachers have to be consistent when it comes to these rules.
Transparency is also important to building a team. After Kuzma’s interview, he did a demo lesson, followed by a debrief. Kane gave him a pass to wander the school. “That was pretty informative,” he says, as he welcomed the “freedom to just go anywhere and look around and see the parts of the school even when he wasn’t there. It was really telling about how well the school was set up. He wasn’t just taking you to his three favorite classes.”

Kuzma remembers being impressed by transitions during passing periods. “By the time the bell rang, there was nobody left in the hallway, and there was no trash in the hallway. All the lockers were closed. It was just really calm. I had never seen that type of transition at a school in Chicago,” says Kuzma.

To unify the team around the mission, the staff members start school a week early, and are given four Fridays off during the year to make up that time. They receive professional development on the instructional model, while new teachers receive differentiated professional development to get them up to speed on discipline and other structures.

As far as communicating plans, staff members say Kane is very direct, but encourages people to come to him with problems. “He’s the type of manager that lets you know what the expectations are, and the goals are, upfront: This is what we need done. But yet he gives you that freedom and that autonomy for you to say, ‘OK I think this is what we need to do, I think we can get there by doing XYZ,’” says Patricia Pena, director of operations. His style: clear, consistent, positive and firm. “The same way he is with our students, he is with our staff,” she says. “If there’s something going wrong, he’ll let you know...It isn’t personal, it’s, ‘I think we can improve this here. This is the deadline I have for this.’” Regular meetings and check-ins are built into the schedule to monitor progress toward goals.

The staff culture is one that revolves around supporting each other, so teachers rely on other team members and deans to help brainstorm and figure out curricular questions. Everyone is assigned to a content team and a grade level team to provide structures of support.

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Constructive Environment

**OBJECTIVE**

A highly constructive learning environment exists that supports academic productivity.

**DRIVERS:**

- Expectations and behavior management systems that support high levels of academic productivity are clear.
- The entire staff is bought into the behavior management system and is used to holding students accountable.
- All classrooms have established an environment that is conducive to learning.
- Staff members are held accountable to upholding the behavior management system and hold students accountable.
- The behavior management system works for most students.
- Interventions are available for students who do not respond to school behavior management system.

Throughout the halls of the school, Kane has made sure that roles and responsibilities are well delineated. “Everything works. Everybody is in the right spot at the right times. There are no loose ends. The structural frame is set up so well it allows people to just concentrate on learning,” says teacher Dan Kuzma. “You have a lot of clarity on what you’re supposed to be doing, when you’re supposed to be doing it and who to ask if you’re not sure about something along those lines,” he adds.

Teachers speak of the importance of a consistent culture to the school’s success. “You maximize instructional time when you focus on culture and you view culture as important as instruction. It might seem counterintuitive to spend a lot of time thinking about the values that you have and how those translate into student behaviors,” says teacher Rachael Udouj. “People might think that takes away from instructional time,
but that actually empowers students to learn more independently without you and internalize some of the habits that will lead to higher quality understanding.”

Kane has a mantra for classroom management that it should be “clear, consistent, positive, and firm with tight attention to detail.” He illustrates what it looks like in his writings to the staff: “When you say, ‘Give me your attention,’ that’s less clear than, ‘Please put all eyes on me with mouths closed in 5,4,3,2,1...’” The second example tells the students exactly how to meet the teachers’ expectations in that moment, cutting down on classroom disruptions from students who may continue talking or looking elsewhere.

Homework is seen as a vehicle not to practice what was covered the day before, but to prepare for what is coming ahead. Teachers should aim to assign homework with depth to make sure students walk in ready to discuss and move ahead with the day’s lesson. Kane also directs teachers to help students find their identity in class and help them feel significant, which he says will motivate them to rise to the higher bar being set. According to “The Spark” document he wrote, the classroom culture should do three things: “1) help kids make each other better, 2) make kids matter and make them significant, and 3) build grit and prepare them for the rigor to come.”

When students arrive the first day of school, Kane has already memorized their names and faces after studying a stack of photos snapped during orientation. “As the kids are coming up to the front door on the very first day of school, he’s saying ‘Hi Nancy, Hi John, Hi Maria,’” says Patricia Pena, director of operations. “The kids, their eyes light up. The principal knows my name! And he says ‘you know the names of people who are important to you.’ Who takes the time in two or three days to learn 400 names with a face, plus the kids who are coming back?”

Aspirational Environment

OBJECTIVE
A highly-aspirational learning environment exists that honors student experience while inspiring future accomplishments.

DRIVERS:
- Vision, values and goals for students are clear and inspiring.
- Students want to come to school because they feel known and cared for.
- Students are recognized for their growth and achievement.
- Social emotional learning curriculum helps students develop self-regulation, positive relationship-building and decision-making skills.
- Exposure to college, career, and enrichment experiences outside of the school community inspires student investment in learning.
- Families are valued for their contributions and offered opportunities to engage in the school community.

The student culture revolves around the ideas of making other people better; no fear, no embarrassment; and attention to detail. “When you build a culture, it’s about making sure those values are actionable and they are things you can coach and reinforce with students,” says Wendy Erskine, the current principal. The no fear-no embarrassment idea is “so central to just developing and pushing them to be the great people I know they are,” Erskine says. “When you fear things, that why you don’t accomplish things, because you’re just holding yourself back because you fear it. If we can break through that and have a place where kids truly don’t fear being themselves, then it opens up a whole new set of possibilities, because kids are like, ‘They’re going to protect me, I can dance in front of 400 kids and no one’s going to laugh at me.’” That carries over to academic work: “I can work on a really, really hard, difficult
math problem that I never thought I’d be able to solve, and I can struggle in front of everyone in my class, and no one’s going to laugh at me,” she says.

Through the student-led discussion model, students cannot opt out of participating in class. “Student engagement is 100 percent different,” says teacher Kelli Segerson. “Everyone still has their personality, but you don’t have the non-talker; it’s not an option.”

Teachers work to tie a student’s success on a quiz or test to their success down the line. “There’s a larger element to it that the habits you are developing by doing this work are the habits students need to be successful over time and in the rest of high school and in college,” says teacher Dan Kuzma. Small details also reinforce the idea of the direction the students are headed. Over a bathroom mirror hangs a sticker with the words “Future college graduate.”

Advisory sessions also help teachers tend to the students’ social-emotional needs. For the first and last six minutes of the day, along with a block during the middle of the day, students are in their advisory group. In advisory, the group works on team-building and culture-building. Students receive a snack and may be given a quote to reflect on and interpret.

The school model also embraces personal physical fitness as a core principle, as students need a healthy and fit lifestyle to perform at their personal best. It supports the themes that students must persevere and work hard to attain goals, such as by pushing through a challenging workout. (The school is a licensed CrossFit gym.)

Kane also made the development of student leaders a core part of Bulls. He arrives to teach his leadership seminar in a suit and tie, with a backpack slung over his shoulder, greeting students at the door with a handshake. The students arrange themselves into tables of four, and he sits at a table too. A sign in the room spells out student expectations: Sit up straight. Make eye contact. Articulate clearly. Respond Appropriately. Track the speaker. Students start off by reviewing the purpose of the class, which is to design a program to train sophomores to mentor freshman. It’s silent for a few moments, until the students start offering answers, and the discussion builds.

“What are some of the most important things you will impart on the new leaders to be successful?” Kane asks.

“Leadership is often viewed as someone just tells a person what do to. That’s a bad leadership example,” one student says, and they continue defining good and bad leadership, snapping their fingers for answers they like. Here the teaching is silent. Kane’s demeanor is relaxed. He appears interested in their discussion, but has obviously turned the reins over to the students.

The discussion is passed from student to student, with the teens waiting for a person to finish a point before starting on their own. This could be a staff meeting, as students discuss the best way to develop an effective plan—by setting a goal, backward planning and setting up systems to measure progress. The teens consider how to define success so they know when they’re doing well.

When there is silence, Kane doesn’t jump to fill it; he lets it lie for a bit. He asks students to articulate why they are here. “I know what it’s like when someone doesn’t help you or support you or be
there for you, so I want to be that person for other people,” one teen says.

As the discussion continues, the students often press the speaker to clarify the question, to fine-tune it so they are sure of the person’s thought process. Students break into groups for 20-minutes to work on their plan. They stay on task throughout.

“Cool. Tough stuff…” he ends.

What do the students make of all this?

Chicago Bulls started implementing the discussion-based model when junior Minnie Freeman was a freshman, so she’s experienced both classrooms where teachers are standing in front of the board teaching and where students are leading the discussion. “The difference is I always said, ‘hmm-hmmm, I get what you’re saying,’ when the teacher was at the board. But when I am in small group or large group, I am able to more say ‘I don’t specifically get this’ or ‘can you help me with this?’” Freeman says. “I would go more into detail than you could with a teacher on the board when everyone’s saying ‘yes, yes I get what you’re saying.’”

With the school’s no fear-no embarrassment emphasis, mistakes are allowed, so the students can feel the support of others. Freeman also says all students have to come to class prepared to participate in the discussion.

As a teacher, Mr. Kane “gives you trust that many teachers or many people would say, ‘Oh you’re a teenager, you don’t really know what you want.’ He doesn’t believe in that, so the fact that he gives you a lot of trust and a lot of freedom, that means a lot for someone who could go through the typical teenage phase of ‘no one understands me.’” Freeman says. The leadership seminar Kane teaches is unlike any other class, she says. “He gives us a job. If we don’t meet the expectations that we ourselves created for that job, then we’re the ones who get the fault for that. He gives you the experience that you are a mature person, you need to face problems and accept the consequence for what you did or didn’t do.”

As far as making the transition to the student-led discussion model, Freeman says the students had to learn to be more proactive about their own learning. If students don’t understand something, they shouldn’t wait until the end of the class. Instead they should raise the question and figure it out together with their group, she says.

Student Juanita Ledesma says the discussion-based model encourages students to work more intensely with their peers. “It opens your mind to realize that in college, teachers are going to be talking and talking—it’s really what you do outside of school that helps you really comprehend what you’re learning in class,” she says.
The leadership team has a wealth of information to assess the school’s direction, from ACT scores, to staff surveys and evaluations. Students take quarterly assessments and deans help teachers reflect on the results, set new goals and make adjustments to their plans based on the assessment reports. Teachers may create their own summative and formative assessments outside of the quarterly assessments given by the Noble network.

To train staff on the school’s approach to data analysis, new teachers spend a week before the returning staff arrives getting to know the test, says teacher Kelli Segerson. The team and managers will work to get new hires up to speed as well. After each interim assessment, teachers receive a data report, “and we spend a lot of time going over them together,” Segerson says. Each content team has a subject facilitator (SF for short). “That SF owns the data, and the SF and your content team reports the data to the dean, the assistant principal and the principal.” The subject facilitator works to help teachers better analyze and respond to their data.

The leadership’s emphasis on data forces teachers to sit down and see where the gaps are, where strengths lie and which next steps to take, says teacher Dan Kuzma. “I don’t know if most people would do that on their own,” he says. Through this process, his science team discovered areas to make improvements. “Every time we sit down, there are three buckets of standards for science: a data set of standards, a process set of standards and a reading-centric set of standards. What it informed us on is we were not emphasizing the data-based standards,” he says. “We were underrepresenting them, and we had to shift back. When we did that, our students were growing more on the tests because they were aligned better.”

To help keep teachers informed of their data, “the dean of students has a crazy Excel spreadsheet tool that really tells you how every subset of students you teach is doing,” Kuzma says. Teachers can see how their classes measure up to the rest of the network and if they’re growing faster or slower in comparison. “It helps you focus specifically on groups within your classes,” he says. He also can make observations such as these students who scored lower last year are doing well, or the higher-performing students from the year before don’t seem challenged.

Teacher Rachael Udouj is a subject facilitator in the English department and says she brings together the team to analyze data after each assessment. When it comes to reading instruction, the team tries to predict which questions students should get right based on the complexity level. “Then we do an item analysis and say how did the class do on those questions and then why,” she says. The team will then drill down into the performance of individual students, looking at whether any bombed it and why. “Then we create next steps. We look at the passages that are coming up. Are these of appropriate complexity based on the data we had from last week? We look at the task complexity, maybe there were some questions we really think they should have gotten, but when we looked at the data, they didn’t.”

Data-Driven Culture

OBJECTIVE
Assessment data is used to drive differentiation.

DRIVERS:
- Purpose and expectations of schoolwide growth and interim assessment data processes are clear.
- Staff is bought into using data to differentiate instruction.
- Valid and reliable growth and interim assessments that match Common Core/College Readiness Standards for all grades and content have been adopted.
- Timely, leader- and teacher-owned processes are conducted to assess, analyze, and act on data at the schoolwide and individual student level.
- Teachers are held accountable to analyzing and using data.

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As for criticism of standardized tests, Kane says while there may be ineffective or poorly designed exams out there, the ACT, AP exams, and a few other college-credit earning tests are actually pretty good. With the mission to empower Bulls students and to open up life opportunities to them, teachers would be doing the kids a disservice if they didn’t help them pass exams in a world where you can’t do much without taking—and passing—an exam. “Want to be a doctor, teacher, lawyer, engineer, nurse, personal trainer, PhD, MBA, CPA, etc.? You’re going to have to pass a test,” Kane writes in his “Spark” document.

With a school model that is built on small-group discussions and having students lead their own learning, the teacher appears to do far less during the class period at Chicago Bulls. But the questions have been carefully planned beforehand, with exemplar answers identified and plans to address misunderstandings. “It takes a lot more big-picture management and discipline to make sure that if I’m here and there’s the table all the way across the room, am I 100 percent sure they’re on task? And how am I narrating that, and enforcing that? If you have that down, it’s easy. If you don’t have that down, it’s hard,” says teacher Dan Kuzma.

There is a learning curve, and it definitely takes more work in the beginning for teachers. To introduce teachers to the model and give them the opportunity to practice, Kane hired students to participate in mock classrooms so teachers could role play for a couple days, trying out different questions and working on their delivery, cadence and pacing. Teachers could have students explain how they felt about the questions and discussions. As teachers gained more experience, the focus of the work became more about refining the questions. “Did this question meet the desired objectives we wanted it to meet? Yes it did, it was a great question. Then we don’t have to write a new one,” says Kuzma. “Or there were elements or parts of it that need to be more robust. OK, we’ll sit down and we’ll make it more robust.”

For more individualized attention, struggling students have the option of attending office hours, which every teacher offers for an hour per week. If the struggle is with the content, Kuzma makes sure to pair those students in groups with really strong students who can be a support in discussions. Teacher Rachael Udouj says that struggling students are encouraged to ask their peers for help. “We teach students intentionally how to work together in small groups so they can do that without me, on their own, outside of class to prepare for class,” she says. “They need each other.”

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**Black Belt Teaching**

**OBJECTIVE**

Teachers effectively plan and implement the curriculum.

**DRIVERS:**

I Curriculum includes a vertical scope and sequence aligned to standards and guides teacher planning.

I Teacher and student schedules maximize student learning and teacher development.

I Whole group instruction is engaging, rigorous and aligned to standards.

I Students receive individualized or small-group instruction based on assessment outcomes.

I Data trends from assessments, observations, and walkthroughs are used to support teacher effectiveness through whole school professional development.

I Staff receive frequent coaching and valuable feedback on their teaching performance.
Student-Led Discussion: How does it work?

About three dozen students filter into DJ Cashmere’s Cultural Studies class, with the sound level in class gradually fading before the bell rings and the room settles into quiet. Cashmere offers a greeting and students respond in unison before he leads them through a brief guided breathing exercise. “Feel free to join or just relax. Breathing in, I calm my body. Breathing out, I smile,” he says. “Dwelling in the present moment, breathing in, I am aware of the day’s anxieties. Breathing out, I let go.”

“In your own time, open your eyes.” And the class transitions into the day’s objective to improve paraphrasing skills.

Meditation is something he brought into the class himself. “I think mindfulness is really important, especially with some of the stuff some of our kids have to deal with outside school,” Cashmere says. “I’ve found it to be a really nice calming influence. And totally worth the investment of time to give the kids a moment to calm down.”

He directs them to turn to their table group, and the groups of about six students start discussing how to break down word definitions in their assigned passage. He’s grouped the students according to their incoming reading skills, while also aiming for heterogeneous groups with racial diversity. In one group, one student is quieter, busy highlighting a paper, but listening to everything that’s being said. The other students are dissecting a sentence. One says “I think I got it,” but instead of surrendering and accepting this answer, the other students press to make sure it’s accurate. Anchor charts around the building reinforce the importance of rephrasing the question well, answering without “likes” and “umms” and remaining curious.

Cashmere rings a bell and the class falls silent. “One of our core values is question everything,” he says, giving a shout out to the class for pushing on every word. The students snap in response. Cashmere’s co-teacher, Christine Peralta, goes around with a chart evaluating individual students’ homework and the way they annotated the passage. “Annotating is not just rewriting the words on the paper,” she reminds them.

After a while, Cashmere asks them to start discussing as a whole class. He reminds the class to give each other direct feedback, and the students begin calling on each other while he remains quiet. With feedback to be more concise, the students return to their small groups, where they become wrapped up in the conversation and ongoing debates.

Within the student groups, Cashmere says he shies away from assigning roles. “I don’t appoint a discussion leader or note taker. Kids’ personalities do slowly reveal themselves,” he says. But he will make sure students don’t fall too deeply into patterns where one person dominates a conversation, or a small group splinters off. “I make sure they’re learning how to do the group work,” he says.

With those skills, students can continue the learning outside the classroom, which “is the only way we’re going to see the change,” Cashmere says. As for the shift in instruction: “It’s been a challenge, but the right kind of challenge.”

A successful class is one in which the students guide the majority of the class and show full understanding. “Once you’ve got your basic class structure in place, it’s kind of plug and play, quiz every day and discussion every day,” he says. “Really, the quality of the lesson comes down to the quality of your question.” Teachers find success bouncing questions off their planning partners.

Because this year’s students had previous experience with the discussion-based model, Cashmere noted a huge improvement in their ability to take part in the discussions and their confidence level in being able to do things such as correct each other’s mistakes, which can be difficult for teenagers who may worry they’ll be viewed as annoying by peers.
PREP AND PLANNING

The schedule is arranged so most teachers lead four classes a day, with 72 minutes of planning plus a 25-minute lunch. As a dean, Dan Kuzma teaches two classes and has three classes of prep when he can tackle his classroom observation responsibilities.

Teachers align the questions for their discussions to the College and Career Readiness Standards. Teachers also will identify examples of what signifies a correct answer, and what indicates a misunderstanding. Kuzma says teachers each have a planning partner who serves as a “thought partner” for their subject or grade level. In regular meetings, they can discuss the questions or talk about structures. The setup makes it so they don’t have to “be on an island by themselves,” Kuzma says.

Teacher Rachael Udouj credits intentional planning with maximizing instructional time. “The hardest part of the discussion model is knowing what kind of feedback to give students to redirect their thinking, if necessary. You really have to know your question and you really have to know what to expect from a student answer in order to give efficient and effective feedback, so it really comes down to the plan,” Udouj says. “Assuming you’ve done all the thinking regarding backward planning, and your discussion question for the day is aligned appropriately to your long-term goals, what are the skills you’ve layered into the question, what is the exemplar answer, what are the potential misunderstandings a student could have and why?”

Getting to that point in the class takes in-depth preparation, and then tweaking. “Today there was a flaw in my question, and I didn’t anticipate a habit deficit my students were going to have, and so we wasted some time,” she says. She ended up changing course in the moment, but figured out how to adjust the question for next year. She’s already made notes for how to change it, and what an exemplar response looks like.

Teachers are not required to turn in weekly lesson plans, but they do have to turn in a yearlong plan at the start of the school year. They also turn in quarterly plans, which take into account recent data.

COACHING

Kane built teacher development into the school model by appointing teachers into dean roles, and assigning them additional responsibilities. Deans conduct classroom observations, help monitor and analyze data, set academic goals and measure progress.

As a dean, Kelli Segerson goes into teachers’ classrooms as often as she can to observe and make sure what they’re doing is aligned to the goals of the school, the grade level and the individual teacher. The deans take the results of the quarterly assessments and help teachers to reflect on those results and adjust their plans.

“One of the best things about our school is we have a lot of autonomy,” Segerson says. There are not set schedules for observations, but deans are expected to have a pulse biweekly on every teacher. “The first thing we always look for is discipline and culture,” she says. “I think especially at the beginning of the year, teachers have to be modeling high expectations and clear instructions and a lot of follow-through as far as what the kids are actually doing. From there, we kind of build up into what the actual objectives are and how those align to unit tests and summative tests.”

Teachers are given the option of how they’d like to receive the feedback—in person or in email. The deans enter their feedback into a Google form that they can then filter according to various categories. “We can always see each other’s feedback and see how often we’ve been in and so on,” Dan Kuzma says.

Deans incorporate positive comments from the observations into their feedback. “The first part of the feedback is narrating the positive, both cultural
aspects and organizational aspects of the room, and then instructional aspects. The second part is teacher next steps,” Kuzma says. “If things need to be adjusted, it’s not framed as ‘food for thought,’ it’s just the next steps. If it’s a classroom that’s doing really well and these are just thought partner ideas, it’s kind of just ‘food for thought’ for pushing the rigor to the next level.”

Every Friday, the deans meet to norm on what they’re looking for in the observations, Kuzma says. Earlier in the school year, there is more focus on discipline and culture to make sure classrooms are compliant with the cultural norms. The team has a nine-point rubric they can use to plot where teachers are in their development. But it’s for the deans’ use only. “They don’t know they’re on the fourth step (in their development),” Kuzma says. “For new teachers, you want to get to compliance first. After you have compliance though, we figured out over the course of the years at Bulls, we’re going to get more learning occurring if students are really committed to the learning process, so the next step for teachers in terms of the discipline and culture piece is how you’re going to push students past compliance.” The staff also is developing rubrics for backward planning and for execution of the discussion-based model. The rubrics help ensure the deans are providing feedback along the same spectrum.

“We spend a lot of time looking at and helping teachers vet their plans at the outset of the year,” says dean Rachael Udouj. Before she became a dean, she recalls the feedback model helping her make improvements in her classroom as she struggled with student investment her first year. “I was really honest about that with my dean and my assistant principal and, literally the next day, I had the assistant principal in my classroom observing to help guide me and find the root of the problem,” she says. The following day, the dean was in the class, and helped her implement some of the suggestions. They then followed up a week later. “I really found that to be helpful, that they came back in when things were going well.”

At Chicago Bulls College Prep there is a fear-no embarrassment emphasis—so the students can feel the support of others, even if they make mistakes.