When Dawn Sandoval, a 2011 Ryan Fellow, accepted the job as principal of Catalyst-Maria High School in the Chicago Lawn neighborhood, she was not just taking on the job of leading a school; she had to lead an institution forward, as the storied Maria High School had been an anchor in the neighborhood for a century. For the entirety of that time, the Sisters of St. Casimir had run the school. But the all-girls Catholic school struggled with dwindling enrollment, and eventually confronted its financial reality by announcing in 2011 that the school was closing. The Catalyst Schools, a charter school network based in Chicago, partnered with the Sisters of St. Casimir to re-open the school in 2012-13 as part of the Catalyst network. Sandoval was charged with recruiting a new freshman class that would be merged with students from the original Maria High School who were determined to graduate from the school. A K-5 school, headed by a different principal, would also be housed in the cavernous building overlooking Chicago’s Marquette Park.

When hiring Sandoval, network executives say they were struck by her tenacity ("No one can keep up with her—literally. She’s an Ironwoman triathlete," points out David Baldwin, vice president for internal operations and strategy for The Catalyst Schools.) With a resume that spans more than 20 years in education, Sandoval blends the knowledge of a curriculum director, the no-nonsense aura of an experienced administrator, and a love of data that only a former science/math teacher can have. Gordon Hannon, CEO of the Catalyst Schools, selected Sandoval to lead the new Catalyst-Maria High School for those traits, as well as because she is a "leader who grounds herself in practical realities, and in evidence, and in research, and in best practices, and in results," Hannon says.

RESULTS

In her first year leading Catalyst-Maria High School, Sandoval skillfully executed the Accelerate Institute’s Framework. Students took the ACT EXPLORE test in August of that initial year to establish a baseline, then took the test again at the end of the year to measure teacher impact and student readiness. Students demonstrated 3.2 points of growth over the school year—an impressive feat when nationally, the average expected growth is 5 points from the end of 8th grade to the end of 11th. The scores of special education students also grew by 2.1 points.
Where to begin

When news spread that the Sisters of St. Casimir would be closing Maria High School, neighbors reacted with honest concern about the loss of a neighborhood fixture. Having founded the school and the neighboring Holy Cross Hospital, the sisters served the white ethnic immigrants who made their homes in the neighborhood’s brick bungalows and two-flats in the earlier part of the 20th century, then welcomed the African-American, Latino and Asian families who later called Chicago Lawn home. Describing someone as a “Maria grad” was a shorthand used in the neighborhood that meant something to people. What would replace it? And would it have the same quality education and connection to the neighborhood?

Soon after the announcement, newly hired Principal Dawn Sandoval and Catalyst officials reached out to introduce themselves to community organizations, local politicians and neighbors. “They did it right,” says Jeff Bartow, executive director of the Southwest Organizing Project, which unites 30 neighborhood groups around issues like fighting the foreclosures responsible for the boarded-up homes dotting the neighborhood. “The sisters and the folks at Catalyst were very interested at an early stage in engaging with others in the neighborhood,” Bartow says. More than a year before Catalyst moved into the Maria building, Bartow and others were invited to tour a Catalyst campus on the West Side of the city. “They were deliberate about the type of model people in the neighborhood would be responsive to,” Bartow says. That model was one that focused on educational outcomes, but also aimed to meet the needs of area families.

The partnership with the sisters was important to earning community buy-in for the Catalyst idea,
says David Baldwin, a vice president for Catalyst. As a result, the new Catalyst leaders have worked to show their respect for the Maria legacy, Bartow says. They collaborated on the Maria Kaupus Center, a youth program located in the south wing of the Maria High School building. Bartow’s Southwest Organizing Project also runs the local operation of Ceasefire, which dispatches former gang members to intervene when gang conflicts erupt. To support those efforts, SWOP and other nonprofits organized a basketball tournament and were searching for a decent gym to host it. They sat down with Sandoval to make their request. “She just made it work,” Bartow recalls. “Catalyst picked up the baton in terms of being really deliberate about making themselves thoughtfully available to the community. It would have been easy to not do that, and say we are in a period of transition, it’s not going to work—but they didn’t.”

Parent Buy-In

Parents who complained about overcrowded or underperforming schools in the neighborhood curiously responded to Sandoval’s invites for meetings and open houses. In those interactions with parents, “Dawn led with culture every single time,” Baldwin says. She would explain to the audience that students would be expected to attend summer orientations, and to take a test before school even began. She stressed the wider Catalyst values that would guide the school: Rigor. Relationships. Hope. Results. Then she explained what she meant by each one, detailing what culture and academic rigor meant to her and what college readiness looked like, Baldwin says. She delved into descriptions of her discipline plan, the uniform requirements, and academic accountability. While Baldwin says most parents reacted favorably, some walked away complaining the model was too demanding—“possibly too demanding of them, though they’d probably never say that,” he says. “Or there was a feeling their child isn’t going to adjust well to this, and they’re probably right,” he says.

For the parents worried about losing the emphasis on values that was part of the Maria tradition, Catalyst offered a model rooted in the educational philosophy and spirituality of the De La Salle Christian Brothers. Family relationships are at the core of all that. Sandoval talks about the relationship between each student’s family and Catalyst-Maria for the long term, at least eight years—the four years of high school, then four years of college. Parents who register their children have to sign a document committing to support their child all the way to college graduation. The details of how to do that are spelled out in the pledge they sign. Parents must promise to help their child arrive on time, and in uniform, while they themselves attend monthly seminars and meetings, spend 30 minutes each night on reading or homework and do “whatever it takes to help him/her become the best person he/she can be.”

“In interactions with parents, Dawn led with culture every single time.”

—David Baldwin
Vice President for Catalyst

Values that guide all decisions and drive expectations.
As early as April, parents were invited in to the school on a monthly basis for carnivals, barbeques and other meetings. School leaders shared what the “professional expectations” for parents would be, letting them know they needed to help model and reinforce the rules for students. That meant encouraging students to enter school with their hats and cell phones off. But Sandoval held out end goals that many of them could get behind: “College graduation. And, to create change agents.” Through all of the events that spring and summer, “it was always coming back to a very specific focus on ‘These are our academic expectations. These are our cultural expectations,” Sandoval says.

Parent Melynyce Hill admits to concern when she learned of the planned transition, as her daughter was in her junior year at a school whose reputation she’d banked on since she herself was a child. “It’s a good school, and pretty much a tradition,” Hill says. “Maria has always been here. It’s safe more familiar.” Her daughter’s classes at Maria had been very small, and she worried about throwing her into classrooms that were co-ed and filled with more students. But the transition went well for her daughter. “Catalyst is a little stricter,” Hill says. “Kids need the structure. Maria was family-based. The girls got used to it. There were probably things they can’t get away with here that they could at Maria because it was like a family.”

Before enrolling, parents also were warned that they would have to attend several conferences throughout the year to discuss their child’s performance. And these conferences are not like your typical report card pickup day. Catalyst-Maria scholars deliver a Power Point presentation to their parents that outlines their performance in class, their goals, and what they need to do to meet those goals. To underscore the importance of these student-led conferences, Sandoval scheduled individual appointments with each parent. For the first round of conferences, roughly 15 parents didn’t show. Sandoval pulled the students whose parents didn’t show out of class. Together they called the parent to set up the next meeting to discuss the student’s grades. It set the tone, Sandoval says. “Everyone knew that was what the expectation was.”

If parents are difficult to pin down for the conferences, “Dawn will literally chase people down,” says teacher Alex Mahrt. “She won’t take no for an answer in terms of getting parents in the door.” While some may find it a little pushy, Mahrt says parents have signed their kids up to go to the school, and know from the start that they’re expected to be partners in their child’s education. Teachers will also do what they can to get parents in the door, such as sending home bus fare for a mother they know may be low on cash. The meetings are required not just so teachers can check off a box on a list, “but for parents to see what our school looks like. They get to walk those hallways, they get to see other classrooms, meet teachers. It’s that whole community. If we want to really truly become a community, where their scholars are successful, they’ve got to come in the door first,” Mahrt says.

Staff Buy-In

The movement-building with the initial Catalyst-Maria staff started in honest conversations with job candidates. As Sandoval sketched out her vision
of a high school that would graduate students college-ready, she also laid out the long list of expectations, encouraging those who agreed to jump on board. Those who didn’t should probably look elsewhere. During interviews with prospective teachers, Sandoval pored over the detailed job description with each candidate, requiring teachers to sign on the dotted line beneath a list of all their responsibilities. “Everybody needs to own every square of this building,” says Sandoval, who has been known to pick up scraps of paper as she walks down the school hallway.

Teacher evaluations, and bonuses, were tied to how well teachers followed through on their promises. Those who signed were given copies of Doug Lemov’s “Teach Like a Champion,” a book they would have to live by as Sandoval infused parts of it into the core of the school’s model.

Sandoval assembled a team of 12 teachers for her first year. The team threw themselves into prepping for the year ahead, forming recognizably tight bonds along the way. Sandoval was able to be in each classroom often, talking about the daily lessons, but also driving home the big-picture ideas that helped connect the staff to the mission every day. Each teacher also had an instructional coach to focus on the daily and weekly lessons.

“The Why” is an important component to Sandoval’s management style. “She doesn’t put anything in front of her teachers or any of her staff that doesn’t have a very thought-out reason behind it,” says Mahrt.

Explaining ‘the why’ sets up a much different conversation with a teacher, Sandoval says. “You’re not just telling them,” she says. And in a similar vein, teachers explain ‘the why’ to students, to earn buy-in for everything from uniforms to the demerit system.

The Student Movement

Student buy-in required an intensive, practical approach. The first week of school, teachers and students filed into the auditorium for 2.5 hours each day to learn in detail what it meant to be part of Catalyst-Maria. “We taught them—this is how we ask you to be quiet,” Sandoval says. For days, they practiced the basics.

To make the high expectations absolutely clear to students, the staff went beyond just talk. “When we talk about how you walk into the auditorium, we’re going to practice,” Sandoval says. Mahrt says the sessions helped teachers set a precedent with their students. “If they see us really taking the time with them and we’re right alongside them practicing things like greetings and handshakes, they see the meaning more,” she says. “It’s not that we’re just putting them up to something.” The sessions also established what was normal. At Catalyst-Maria, “normal” would be an exceptional culture with all scholars striving to excel. “It’s not just something a couple kids do,” Mahrt says. “In high school, that inclusion piece is an important one on a social level.”

Sandoval wanted to explain to students the reason
they might be asked to do certain things. For instance, Sandoval decided a perfect uniform would be a non-negotiable. As Sandoval shook students’ hands at the door, she would check their uniform, directing students without belts to get that problem fixed or instructing them to neaten up where she explains, because it shows the importance of being prepared.

In their college seminars, students connected with the teacher who would be their adviser for all four years, as well as the students with whom they’d share their high school career. Together, the group would meet every morning and every afternoon, to take care of housekeeping tasks like checking demerits and grades, but also to provide a home where they would find a trusted adult at the beginning and end of each day.

To re-enroll the students in the mission, each college seminar would start with students reciting the Catalyst-Maria scholar pledge.

To help tighten the parent’s relationship to the school throughout the year, teachers were encouraged to call home for any problems. But also, “if someone’s doing an outstanding job on a daily basis, you call home for that,” says Mahrt. “You call home for a lot of different reasons, and that helps your relationship with those parents. It’s not like they see this number and they dread picking up the phone because they know it’s going to be bad. We don’t want that.”

Catalyst-Maria started the year with 176 students. During the year, six were expelled and four left because of culture fit, meaning the school closed out the year with 166 students, according to Catalyst data. For year two, all but three of the 166 returned.
Now what?

The teachers are on board, and parents and students have bought in. But it’s halfway through the school year, and some of that initial enthusiasm has waned. “You have young teachers who buy into it, but never really tasted it,” says Catalyst CEO Gordon Hannon. “They can move, move, move, but midyear comes and they’re tired.”

How can the leader motivate staff to keep working harder, to not let up on the little things, and above all, to not forget the mission?

It’s a daily responsibility. One that is carried out through solid structures, regular check-ins and mission reminders—gestures both large and small. The Catalyst-Maria mantra of “100 percent” is pervasive, instructing staff and students to give 100 percent effort 100 percent of the time. Principal Dawn Sandoval will spotlight inconsistencies. “After uniform check, if a scholar needs to be told a second time to correct their clothing, then I have to have a conversation with the teacher. Because they have to own that first,” Sandoval says of her staff.

The first semester, Sandoval stayed focused on culture. “They really got sick of it,” she says. “All of my feedback was around what you’re doing right with ‘Teach Like a Champion.’ Are you holding up with 100 percent?” But as the staff moved on to new goals, such as improving instructional rigor, she had to be sure not to allow the culture slide.

As Catalyst’s David Baldwin sees it, Sandoval’s success through her first year is tied to the fact that she absolutely knew what she wanted and could communicate that clarity of vision to the staff. She put practical systems in place to keep everyone on that path. “She manages very well with regular meetings and touch points, letting them know what to expect in terms of deliverables in between,” says Baldwin, vice president for internal operations and strategy. And if someone doesn’t show up, she jumps in herself, modeling the behavior she hopes to nurture in her staff.
She tried to create a place where teachers could come together and collaborate, a place where they could find colleagues who would have their back. “As part of a professional community, they struggle together, they celebrate together. That’s a piece of good leadership to recognize your team needs that,” says Catalyst CEO Gordon Hannon. “In the long haul, it’s how they will feel better about their work, and it softens the pain of long hours.” At Catalyst-Maria, having a large group of Teach for America teachers on staff helped, as they naturally seemed to form a bond to help each other out. Sandoval also tried to celebrate achievements and little things like birthdays, whether doing so in person or adding lines in her weekly communications. “Recognition is key,” Sandoval says. “I can get better at that. But I think that we’ve laid the foundation. Because you have to have the aspirational environment, not just for the scholars, but for the team to know that they’re valued.”

Structures and Systems

Beyond setting aspirational goals for the staff, the leader needs to establish the right structures and systems to keep the staff and students on the right trajectory. Sandoval evaluates staff members according to instructional and cultural rubrics that are aligned to the mission, vision, and values. But it’s a work in progress to maintain teacher buy-in. The leadership created grade-level teams in an attempt to bring teachers together to focus on “norming” various cultural aspects, says Elizabeth Ahrens, director of instruction. “Our goal with that was to get teachers to buy-in a little more. We can say that all we want is kids need to have two buttons buttoned, but until the teachers own that, none of the kids are going to have two buttons in class,” she says. How do you get teachers to own it? Ahrens says intentional questioning helps. An administrator can guide the conversation when need be, but also should know when to step back and be the note taker, so teachers can take ownership. “We’ve tried to put the questions in place that are going to get them to the conclusions we want them to be at, and we spend a lot of time doing that,” Ahrens says. For example, leaders turned over the question of what a tardy looks like to the grade-level teachers. Could the student be walking inside the classroom or did he or she have to be in their seat when the bell rang? “Grade-level teams determined what tardy meant and normed themselves.” says principal intern Drew Goltermann, a 2013 Ryan Fellow.

At the end of the first semester, Sandoval also organized a culture “reset,” gathering faculty input on what was working, and where the staff, students, and leadership might be slacking. In marathon sessions with students, the team dove into specifics of their own first semester assessment. “It was going back to ‘here’s what we introduced in August, and here’s what we’re seeing and that’s not acceptable, here’s how we’re going to go forward,’” Baldwin says.

It was also important not to take on too much too fast, pulling away from the team’s focus. Sandoval delayed implementation of a Parent University program, which aims to further connect parents to the idea of college, until she was sure the school could execute it.

With students, Sandoval reaffirmed the mission through a handshake as they walked into school in the morning. In that moment, she could set high expectations by pointing out uniform shirts that needed to be tucked in. She could hold students accountable with a simple question about why a student was absent or missed an assignment. She could check their emotional state as the

“"We can that all we want is kids need to have two buttons buttoned, but until the teachers own that, none of the kids are going to have two buttons in class.” —Elizabeth Ahrens
Director of Instruction
handshake “allowed me to figure out who was having a bad day,” she says. “Before school started, I could connect them with someone.” She’s known to some as the “meanest principal in the city,” a small point of pride, says Baldwin. “Every one of them from K-12 grade knows she means business, but she also is one they’ll walk up to and hug.”

The school leadership created “Academic Accountability” to drive home the point that homework must be completed. Those students who don’t finish all of their homework earn themselves a mandatory session in “AA” as it’s known at Catalyst-Maria.

While teachers are expected to stay on top of individual student data, students also monitor their own performance. All scholars keep a “data notebook” where they reflect quarterly on what their strengths are and identify weak spots where they need to focus. The students lead the parent conferences themselves, drafting Power Point presentations that demonstrate to their parents exactly where they stand, and where they need to go. “That was new. It lets the kids be accountable for certain things,” says parent Melynyce Hill. While she’s satisfied with her daughter’s academic work, if she did have a problem, “she’d have to explain that to me. Kids don’t want to tell their parents that.” A student Power Point may share a college short list and outline the average ACT scores for students admitted to those schools, complete with graphs that show the scores the student must attain to achieve the goal.

The conferences help refocus students, and their parents, on the goals. For the first year and into the second year, the attendance rate for parents at these conferences averaged 98 percent. Sometimes parents received bad news from their own child about their performance. But the bad news was couched in the fact that the student was delivering it in a manner that should make parents proud, says CEO Gordon Hannon.

Year Two: A New Challenge

As she closed out year one, Sandoval was given another challenge: taking over the elementary school, too. The first year, Sandoval led the high school, and another principal ran the elementary school. “There were two leaders in the same building that didn’t come together,” Sandoval says. “Now I have the entire building. Literally, we had a team of elementary teachers and a team of high school teachers that never connected.” She had a high school team that had culture down after the first year and was ready to move onto instruction, but she also had 25 new people who needed to be grounded in the school’s culture. In year two, she filled the schedule of the summer institute with sessions like “Experiencing Mission through a Community of Achievement and Excellence,” and plenty of time for staff to reflect on the mission. Teachers also took sessions on high expectations, discipline, and lesson planning. A model classroom walk was planned to showcase classrooms that were scholar-centered, with rich literacy libraries, content posters, effective feedback systems, and college corners. As the year got underway, she organized events like regular staff breakfasts every Monday.
WHAT DIDN’T GO WELL

That first year, with a small staff and small leadership team, it was easier for Sandoval and Ahrens to stay on top of everything. “We really owned everything, which kind of bit us a little bit later because teachers got used to it. That was their expectation,” Ahrens says. “We didn’t do enough to build our teacher-leaders last year, and a lot of that was because everybody was really young.” Sandoval agrees that the teachers initially shied away from taking control of issues themselves. “It was still my voice in the hallway getting scholars to class in time, it was still my voice at a meeting,” she says. Teachers would come in to report they saw a problem instead of attacking the situation themselves. “Looking back, Dawn and I would both say we’d be intentional about that from the beginning,” Ahrens says. “We would maybe take our control freak personalities out of it a little bit more and really work to build those leaders.” Once Sandoval and Ahrens identified the problem, they determined that creating grade-level teams could help build their teacher-leaders. In year two, Sandoval’s effort to build teacher-leaders continues, evidence of which can be seen on the white board in her office that lists teachers volunteering to lead different committees.
Building the team

Principal Dawn Sandoval used a detailed, multilayered hiring process to identify her team members. The process was designed to present teacher candidates with an honest depiction of what life would be like in the school. Candidates were given a comprehensive rundown of what would be expected of them in every aspect of their job—how they presented themselves, how they worked as part of a team, how they handled instructional planning, and how they incorporated data. Prospective teachers were provided videos to watch that gave a sense of the school and the neighborhood, then instructed to reflect on whether it was a place for them. Essay questions were targeted to reveal teaching philosophies and their commitment to the mission. An example:

Our school holds its entire school community to the highest of expectations—based on what is possible in public education. Our school community is made up of parents, scholars, administrators, staff and teachers, each of whom plays a crucial role in the learning process and is held accountable accordingly. Describe a school environment—including interaction between and among scholars, teachers and leaders—that is characterized by high expectations. What strengths and characteristics do you possess that will contribute to our school’s mission of college graduation?

Candidates had to undergo a team interview and do a sample teach. They had to bring in scholar data and walk the interviewer through it. Sandoval checked up to 10 references and required teachers to commit to a longer school day and a culture of high expectations. Sandoval says she recently lost two solid teacher candidates because of the expectations she laid out for them. “I’m OK with that in the long run,” she says. “The people who are here are committed to what we expect.”
Teacher Elizabeth Kenna says from the beginning, Sandoval “made it very apparent that if we didn’t meet these expectations, we needed to find a different place to be.” The list of responsibilities for teachers was long, but accompanied with support. “Dawn made it clear if we want to be here, she will make it a place for us to succeed. My first year she was constantly in my room working with me,” Kenna says. Coaches will be in her room and identify the 20 things going right, “but they’ll also see the one thing that I can push on to get better,” she says.

Sandoval organized a 10-day summer institute for teachers to arm them with an understanding of Catalyst-Maria’s systems and structures. The schedule was packed with “data days,” sessions on backward planning, and meetings with the interim assessment team. Staff members were expected to demonstrate that they understood the backward planning materials by bringing in lesson plans. Teachers role-played situations with students to help everyone understand the expectations for school culture. To help cement bonds on the team, Sandoval also invited them to two socials to help everyone get to know each other.

A lesson she learned from year one is to engage all employees in the same type of rigorous hiring and onboarding process that she used with her teacher candidates. “What didn’t go well is the quality and training and follow up with paraprofessionals,” Sandoval says. They weren’t included as intentionally in professional development and coaching, and as a result, they were not as invested in their professional learning, which caused a “disconnect of ownership,” she says.

Let’s be honest
Sandoval’s first year wasn’t without conflict in terms of personnel. Catalyst CEO Gordon Hannon recalls challenges Sandoval had with a member of her leadership team who needed to be pushed. “I did see her address it head on, and have the honest conversations necessary to make sure somebody knows where he or she stands and what they can do about it,” Hannon says. “I did see her have those very honest conversations in a very tactful way, which I think a lot of administrators avoid.”

Staff members insist they value the direct, honest approach. “We’re open and honest with the kids about where they’re at. Dawn is open and honest with all of us,” says Elizabeth Ahrens, Director of Instruction. Of course, critical feedback is not always fun. “No one leaves the meeting saying ‘Great! I have so many things to work on! I’m so pumped about it!’” Ahrens jokes.

Accountability and honesty are at the heart of the culture at Catalyst Maria. “A lot of people...don’t want to hear it...but those aren’t the people we look to hire,” says Elizabeth Ahrens, Director of Instruction at the school.

“But Dawn’s also very open and honest about what she’s working on, what she thinks she’s good at. It’s just kind of a culture that she’s created.” By pushing the idea of consistent coaching for everyone, it’s created an environment of constant learning for all, one that puts a premium on honesty. “A lot of people think they don’t want to hear it, and maybe a lot of people don’t, but those aren’t the people we look to hire,” Ahrens says. “As a startup, we had an opportunity to hire everybody, and we did our best to hire people that would fit in well to that type of culture.”

Teachers agreed the honest conversations are essential to the culture. “There are a lot of
conversations that need to be had, and they need to be blunt—no putzing around the fine details,” says Kenna. “A few times people will be shy and not say something because they don’t want to step on anyone’s toes, but the only way we grow is to have these conversations.” She acknowledges that it requires individual teachers to get over the sometimes uncomfortable nature of these important chats. “It’s awkward for me to go to someone who has been teaching 5 years, but not in our culture, and say, ‘Hey glad you’re here, but our culture is a little different. How can we adjust to assure we can meet somewhere in between?’” Kenna says.

As the administration works to build teacher-leaders, it’s also been important for the staff to see teachers take an issue on themselves, such as when teachers helped to reset the culture in the twice-daily college seminars. Teacher Faith Le said that although the college seminar time is short—just a few minutes at the beginning and end of the day—teachers seemed unclear about what to do in that time. The leadership noticed the classroom activities weren’t in line with the vision. “It was clear both teachers and students needed a reminder of the purpose of seminar,” Le says. As Le tried to help come up with a plan, she went back to the ideas incorporated into the foundation of the school. She created college seminar lesson plans for teachers to use and to help them clearly spell out the expectations for students. She built in ways for teachers to schedule the miniconferences they were supposed to be holding by setting up a template for assigning conferences. “Every day we say the high school pledge and I take it to heart, it’s like the pledge of allegiance for Catalyst—something we make scholars say every day, but something that holds true for our leadership team,” Le says. “I think about how all those things play together in terms of culture, what it means in terms of data. I feel like that’s what we always fall back on, and it all helped me form these ideas of how to communicate to teachers and how to communicate the purpose of seminar.”

The Sticker Chart

Regular accountability processes were created to help keep the staff on track. At Catalyst-Maria, one such example can be seen in the colorful sticker chart on the wall of Ahrens’ office. “Some people hate this,” she admits. “It’s probably the people without the stickers, but just like we motivate the kids, we need to motivate our teachers, and just like we have high expectations for kids, we have high expectations for teachers.” The poster charts teachers’ compliance in turning in lesson plans and entering grades. Ahrens checks them every week to every other week. “I try to be reasonable,” Ahrens says. “We look for 3 to 4 grades per week, balanced in terms of homework, classwork, assessments, and then their unit plans and their assessments.”

The sticker chart motivates some, and others—not so much. Le says the sticker chart can definitely help motivate teachers. “I understand where it’s coming from,” she says. But it also can shine a spotlight on those who can’t keep up with a workload everyone describes as extensive. Its presence sends the staff the message that the leadership is following up. Ahrens says. School leaders say the type of planning tracked in the sticker chart is critical to building a successful school. “If you are not planning, if you are not writing your assessments ahead of time and knowing what your end goal is, if you’re not writing unit plans, writing lesson plans to get there and giving your kids timely and strong feedback, isn’t that the essence of a strong school?” Ahrens says. One teacher particularly hated the public nature of the sticker chart and wanted it put on the computer where teachers

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could check it privately. But Ahrens says the chart pushes both the teachers and the administration. If a teacher shows up without stickers, that raises questions about why the administrators allow them to get away with it. There was one line the first year that was pretty much blank, Ahrens says, and that teacher did not return for year two.

Because of the extensive workload her teachers take on, Sandoval also elevates simple gestures to show respect and gratitude. “When you’re brought into our team, I’ve committed $1 million to you—you are my $1 million investment,” she says, tallying up the training and other investments the school makes in its teachers. To commemorate that, she hands out 100 Grand candy bars out to staff members as part of a small recognition. “We have so many Teach For America teachers—that’s the predominant educator in our building—and after 2 years, they could be done,” Sandoval says. She wants to make Catalyst-Maria a place where teachers decide to stick for the long haul. “A revolving door of a team is never going to get us to the end goal of excellence,” she says. At the end of year one, all but one teacher stayed on staff, with two teachers taking on leadership roles and one paraprofessional becoming a full-time teacher.
Constructing the Classroom

In Kelly Dore’s 9th grade English and writing class, the 24 students are arranged in groups of four. The temperatures hover in the single digits outside, but the huge room is warm—too warm for some to concentrate. Ms. Dore weaves around the groups. She continues talking, narrating the positive she sees on their papers while making gentle suggestions about how to improve their compound sentences. A slide on the screen at the front of the room reminds scholars to:

- Use your college voice
- Track the speaker
- Show your connections
- SLANT. (Sit up. Listen. Ask and answer questions. Nod and Track speaker.)

Dore cold-calls on one boy who is looking around the room, but not at his paper. He is surprised and lost when she questions him, making it obvious he wasn’t paying attention. She gives him a firm stare. “Ok, we will come back to you for the next one,” she says, which causes him to sit up straight. She directs the next question to the boy to give him a chance to get it right.

“You guys are really hanging in there for this review. I appreciate it,” she says after he answers correctly.

A second year TFA teacher, Dore implemented procedures in her classroom that “balance that strictness with warmth,” says principal intern Drew Goltermann, a 2013 Ryan Fellow. “Discipline comes first, but they do it in a way that scholars learn themselves to make the right decisions.”

Teachers spend much time at the beginning of the year on establishing structures and procedures like those seen in Dore’s class. Later, they will be able to layer on top of that foundation. For example, Alex Mahrt teaches a longer block of English and writing, and it can be difficult to keep the students engaged the entire time. “But this late in the year, we use so many different structures and so many
procedures that they know exactly what their day looks like,” she says. That, in turn, helps them stay in the conversation because they know what to expect next.

Students know the rules before they enter the building. Those without a belt will be ordered to correct it. Damian, a freshman student, outlines what a proper uniform should entail: Black dress shoes or Vans, black belt, no colored socks, tucked-in shirts and the appropriate polo that indicates your grade. He explains the uniform’s benefit for the student body: It doesn’t distract kids from worrying about what everyone is wearing. Plus, “they can’t really make fun of you if you’re all wearing the same thing,” he says.

100% for Students Too

The “100 percent” idea carries over to homework. “If you do 20 of the math problems, but not no. 21, then you have Academic Accountability,” says Elizabeth Ahrens, director of instruction. Academic Accountability, or AA as it is known in the halls of Catalyst-Maria, means students have to stay after school for 50 minutes. In a silent study hall, they will have a chance to make up the homework they didn’t finish, and to earn credit for it. In year two, with new classes of 9th, 11th and 12th-graders, Ahrens said a lot of students ended up in AA as they adjusted to the Catalyst-Maria system. “We’re legitimately retraining kids to do their homework,” she says. As an example, she describes students pointing to a five-sentence assignment for which they only wrote two sentences, and asking what’s the difference? The difference, as Ahrens explains, is that “culturally we’re at 100 percent. We’re teaching that expectation in a variety of different ways. We believe 100 percent extends outside of school.” By mid-year, the juniors and seniors had adjusted to the new expectations, so she’d only have a handful of the older students in AA in the afternoons, but she had a much larger class, up to 50 students, for the 9th grade. She was not expecting it to taper off for freshman, as staff didn’t see much improvement the first year. “But we saw a huge shift from how sophomores came in this year from last year,” Ahrens says. “They seemed to get it when they got back.”


Reminders of college are everywhere in the school. College flags hang from the high ceilings of the hallways of Catalyst-Maria, reflecting off the glossy old floors. Each “college seminar,” or homeroom, adopts the name of a college, so students refer to classes as “Michigan,” “North Carolina,” and “Harvard.” Students come together for “college colloquiums,” where the school celebrates successes. The hallway is peppered with recognition of students who have increased their Lexile scores or done well on other tests. “We lead with college,” says Principal Dawn Sandoval. Visits to colleges and universities are scheduled throughout the year, to campuses like Valparaiso, Notre Dame, the University of Illinois, Trinity Christian and Columbia. Students must be without detentions and passing all their classes in order to go. Sandoval says that prior to these trips, very few students have had the experience of visiting a university campus. “They come back different,” she says. And while students may return wanting to attend the university they visited, “I also want to be really specific that not everybody’s going to go to Northwestern.” Through the College Exploration class, scholars research admission requirements, and talk about finding the right fit.

Parent Melynyce Hill found the college visits
helped her daughter make better decisions and think through why she wanted to attend certain colleges. She’s narrowed it down to Western Illinois and Olivet. “It’s helped her decide where, and how far she wanted to go,” Hill says.

Sometimes students will visit a college that may be considered a reach and come back with a new focus. Sandoval recalls the story of twins who both attended the school the first year. The brother had always been a stronger student academically, and Sandoval could see that affected the confidence level of his sister. At the end of the year, the sister spoke at a parent engagement session and said she realized the reason why Catalyst-Maria had strict rules and high expectations. The girl relayed that she had just returned from a visit to the University of Illinois and told the crowd: “That’s where I’m going. I know that with what we do here, I will be prepared for when I go to college,” Sandoval recalls.

“When the scholars start verbalizing why we do what we do, when they’re internalizing and you have conversations with them and they’re not punitive, they are reflective and they are talking in the terms of ‘I am going to this college. This is what I’m going to do.’ That’s when you know what you’re doing is working,” Sandoval says.

A 2013 Ryan Fellow, Drew Goltermann was assigned as a principal intern to Catalyst-Maria for the 2013-14 school year, giving him the opportunity to see how former fellow Dawn Sandoval put the fellowship’s framework into action. “Dawn, in a lot of ways, really lives the model and our school is an accurate representation of what’s possible when the model is put into place,” Goltermann says.

Thoughts from a Ryan Fellow

For example, Sandoval is “relentless” about communicating with clarity, he says. At the weekly Monday staff meetings she leads, staff members receive a pacing guide that outlines her priorities for the week and the month. During a push toward small-group instruction, Sandoval used the guide and morning meetings to spotlight teachers who were using small group techniques well. By doing so, Sandoval offered praise to those teachers excelling, while also helping others see what they should be striving toward. “The heart of clarity is everybody knowing what the priority is, what the strategy is, and being able to execute their part of that strategy,” Goltermann says.

He found it helpful to observe how Sandoval implemented Cornerstone I of the framework, which revolves more around building relationships. “We talk a lot about academic accelerators and those are in place here, and underlying all of that work is the work that Dawn does in really just making sure that people are in board,” Goltermann says. That onboarding “doesn’t look the same for everybody,” he says. Goltermann noticed how Sandoval used her time with individual teachers and staffers to try to understand what motivates them. “She describes it to me as really listening to people’s struggles and being open to that,” he says. “It gives you a hint to how people feel around the building and builds trust.” Some of that comes naturally to leaders; others will have to work harder to make those observations about staff.

“Dawn has a mental Rolodex, so to speak, of what her teachers respond to—some people just want it laid out there, some people want the positive praise, some just want the feedback right away—and she knows all that when she’s preparing for conversations,” he says.

He recalled the approach being put to use when the administration decided to change its procedures for lesson plans. Some teachers were not planning properly and it was evident in the classroom. The new routine required more of teachers, so Sandoval was intentional in how she approached teachers. She knew who was going to respond in a negative way if the news was just tossed at them, so she reached out to those teachers before the announcement was made to
everyone.

Observing Sandoval at work has influenced Goltermann’s planning for his own school. While he considers his strengths to lie in systems and strategies, he’s seen from Sandoval how leveraging relationships also will be important for his school’s success. He has added in structures to help him work on cementing those relationships, such as morning meetings where the staff will reflect back on the mission in some way every day. “Without those in place, I could lose that clarity,” he says. “In terms of creating a movement, I’m intentionally designing that on my end right now for my own school.”
More Time for Quality

The school day at Catalyst-Maria begins at 7:30 a.m., and instruction continues until 4 p.m. Students start their day in college seminar, with the adviser who will follow them through high school. When building their plan, Principal Dawn Sandoval and Director of Instruction Elizabeth Ahrens determined that every scholar would take 50 minutes of English, 50 minutes of writing, 50 minutes of Social Studies, math and science, plus a College Exploration and PE class. French and Spanish would be offered for foreign language, while extra reading classes would be available for lower-level readers. The schedule allows them the flexibility to offer classes like AP Human Geography and a pilot program with an engineering focus called Project Lead the Way. In their College Exploration class, students learn how to use computers and fill out financial aid applications—but more importantly, how to wrap their mind around the idea of college.

From 4 to 4:50 p.m., students who didn’t complete their homework stay for Academic Accountability. To clear time for professional development, the administration set an earlier dismissal time on Fridays. Students leave at 1:15 p.m. and teachers head into professional development sessions or collaborative meetings. The school has at least 10 more days of instruction than required by the regular CPS calendar, according to David Baldwin, a vice president for The Catalyst Schools.

By incorporating “Teach Like a Champion” methods into the core design of the school, teachers are equipped with systems and procedures to maximize instructional time. Coaches visit often to help teachers use Teach Like a Champion. Strategies like “no opt out” or having classroom greeters are embedded in daily routines. “All of our students know what that means, and we’re good at using the vocabulary all across the board, teaching the students when they first get here what all these words mean,” says teacher Faith Le.

Teachers have six classes to teach, two prep periods, and advisory in the morning and afternoon. But one challenge of developing teacher-leaders is giving them the time to take on those extra roles, as their days are filled, Le says. Teachers generally stay until 5 p.m. to include time for mandatory tutoring and office hours.

For students who need more assistance, Catalyst-Maria also offers after-school tutoring and
mentoring through a program developed by the Sisters of St. Casimir. Students have access to academic supports until roughly 6 p.m., says Catalyst CEO Gordon Hannon. The 3-6 p.m. time period after dismissal, but before the adult world returns from work, can be a lost zone for students. “It prevents opportunities for things to go awry,” Hannon says.
A Jumpstart on Data

To provide teachers and administrators with the data they need on day one, Principal Dawn Sandoval dove into data collection early, even before school started. Students were brought in during the summer to take an EXPLORE or PLAN test that would show where each student was academically. That data was put to use immediately to place students in groups.

Catalyst CEO Gordon Hannon says Sandoval and her director of instruction, Elizabeth Ahrens, have been “smartly” data-driven in their approach. “I see some schools who say ‘we collect a lot of data.’ But they aren’t exactly sure what to do with it,” he says. “It didn’t really inform instruction, they didn’t have a methodical approach to it or understand what it meant for instruction and what it meant for proficiency and mastery.” That’s not the case at Catalyst-Maria. The school leadership is serious about collecting the right data, but not making the staff’s efforts all about a number, Hannon says.

They selectively choose data sets they know can inform instruction.

During the summer session for teachers, staff were prepped on how to create a rigorous question that’s aligned to the College Readiness standards and Common Core. Teachers use protocols from “Driven by Data” by Paul Bambrick-Santoyo.

Students were given interim assessments every 10 weeks, starting in October. The school partnered with GAINS Education Group, which supports school efforts to use standards-based assessment data to improve student learning. After testing, Catalyst-Maria received its data reports within about 48 hours, with detailed break downs by class and scholar. The staff also tracked Lexile data. When the first round of summary data was released, Sandoval met with each individual teacher and helped them create an action plan for each class period, modeling what they should be doing. For the second round, teachers were given the broad summary of data, but they needed to produce their own analysis, modeled
after Sandoval’s. They met to discuss and decide on a plan of attack. Students were identified for mandatory tutoring or full reteach sessions.

Ahrens developed a detailed worksheet that leads teachers through the questions they should be asking about their data. They must identify three major wins in their data, along with three “priority substrands.” Questions prompt teachers to consider how they taught certain substrands prior to the assessment, and how they will need to reteach based on the data. Further, teachers are asked to articulate how they will measure scholar mastery using classroom assessments.

Scholars’ ability to grasp the meaning of their scores also proved important. Once scholars understood their scores—and saw growth—they were motivated by that data as well, Sandoval says. “I think that you’ve got to put it in front of them, and you need to explain to them where they’re at realistically,” Sandoval says. “Talk to them about what ‘benchmark’ is and where they stand in relation to that, making it clear that they’re in ‘such and such group,’” she says. The student’s data focus culminated in the scholar-led conferences, where scholars summarized their own performance and behavioral data for their parents and teacher. In data notebooks, students tracked their growth, which was also displayed on the classroom walls. The first college trip was made available to those students who demonstrated a point growth from the initial EXPLORE test in the summer to the October test, underscoring the importance of growth.
Expanding the Tool Box

To sharpen teachers’ skills in small group instruction, the administration brought in trainers from the Kagan Institute for two days of training. “We always encouraged our teachers to do small group instruction, but Kagan really outlines exactly what it should look like,” says Elizabeth Ahrens, director of instruction. Teachers learned how to properly set up a group, so students are constantly interacting in new and different ways within the structure. Kagan offers 42 different structures to encourage students to work in cooperative groups.

A walkthrough of the school shows most classes arranged in groups, or set up so the teachers can quickly organize the class into groups. There’s a common language around the idea so scholars know exactly what to do. “They know how to do it when we say ‘turn to your face partner, turn to your shoulder partner’—it’s all structured,” Ahrens says. The Kagan Strategies help teachers hold students accountable, says teacher Elizabeth Kenna. For example, she’ll have the class do a “round robin” where every single person has to share an idea before the group. She employs the Kagan Strategies daily in three or four different ways, often using rally coaching. She seats a lower-performing scholar next to a student who is in the next level up, then gives them a problem to work on together. One acts as the problem solver, the other the coach. “I’ve seen great growth with that, especially in math,” Kenna says. “When they have to voice ‘oh, you have to walk through that next step,’ they can get to the next level.”

In Alex Mahrt’s English classes, she employs lit circles, grouping the students heterogeneously, so a relatively high-performing scholar sits alongside a medium-high performing student, a medium-low performing and a low-performing student. The point is to blend different knowledge and skill sets. “We’re able to see a lot of cool things happening when we mix the groups up,” Mahrt says. “They
get to be exposed to what we call ‘different brains.’ Everybody’s got a different brain. Even if you scored low on this specific standardized test, that doesn’t mean you’re not contributing to the group.” High-performing scholars develop leadership skills by helping those who are still working toward benchmark, while lower-performing students hear what fluency sounds like.

Employing a strategy in the weeks after a training may not be unusual, but the challenge lies in making sure teachers are using the strategies well after the enthusiasm dissipates. In her weekly email, Sandoval outlines goals for teachers’ incorporation of Kagan Strategies. When she visits rooms, she may ask what Kagan strategy the teacher is using. “As the school year is going on, you kind of lose focus of structures,” Kenna says. “So having a refresher and giving updated ideas really is helpful to not only change things up, but to keep things consistent at the same time.”

Individualize Instruction

Carnegie Learning’s Cognitive Tutor program enables math teachers to further individualize instruction. Twice a week, participating students line up in rows at laptop computers, where they have the opportunity to work at all different levels. If students get stuck on a problem, they can click a ‘hints’ button for ideas on how to work through the area stumping them. The class is co-taught by an algebra teacher and a support teacher who works with special education students.

In mandatory tutoring sessions, teachers use a small-group setting to focus on certain skills. The sessions are informed by data, because “we are very intentional about who comes to that tutoring,” Mahrt says. “We know it’s just not a reality to have everyone that’s below benchmark attending tutoring...and we want to make it meaningful for the kids that do come.”

Three-hour Saturday morning enrichment sessions are devoted to working with small groups of students on reading strategies, drilling down into basics like phonics. The list of students involved changes every quarter. “Last year that just made huge improvements for a lot of our students,” Mahrt says. The 28 students who participated in the Saturday sessions saw decent growth on their Lexile reading scores and grew by nearly 4 points on the EXPLORE, according to school data reports.

Response to Intervention

Catalyst has a Response to Intervention (RTI) team in place to help guide teachers through the data collection process, assist with lesson plans, and provide a push to be sure students are getting what they need, says Kenna. In weekly professional development time, staff members talk through how they’re identifying and helping students. Special education teachers and the student services coordinator are available to help teachers make accommodations in the classroom. “If we have students who just aren’t understanding in class, the (school leaders) will also brainstorm with you,” Kenna says. Another option is to bring it to the grade-level team to discuss what next steps should be taken.

But getting the right support to meet the high demand for special education families was difficult as the school was opening, Sandoval says. She did not start the year with a social worker, a need that was underestimated. Sandoval found a way to add a social worker to the staff because of the high demand. For year two, the administration recognized they’d be on track to have a high special needs population, and hired a special needs manager for the faculty.
Academic Accelerators: Systems and Structures

Driver 4: Implement Standards-Based Curriculum

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

Start with Common Core

When designing the school, Catalyst network officials say the principals were given a pretty free hand, as not all of the schools use exactly the same programs. However, the plan was always driven by Common Core standards. “While we want to nurture some creativity and some local autonomy, we also have to identify the points that are non-negotiable, and certain Common Core-aligned curriculum embedded across the network is nonnegotiable,” says Catalyst CEO Gordon Hannon.

The first hire Principal Dawn Sandoval made was her director of instruction, Elizabeth Ahrens. The budget wasn’t available to bring in a crowd of curriculum consultants, so Ahrens and Sandoval dove into research themselves, scheduling observations of successful schools, researching book lists, and considering Common Core/College Readiness Standards. After swimming in that information for awhile, they created objectives. They aligned the objectives horizontally in terms of subjects, so if students are working on a biography in writing class, they’re going to read a biography at the same time in their English class to give them background knowledge. If they’re learning about Nazi Germany in World History, they may be reading “Night” by Elie Wiesel.

The focus of their effort was on standards plus skills. Sandoval and Ahrens finished off their pacing guides before school started, so they could distribute them to teachers during the summer training session. To make sure teachers stayed on track, they were required to turn in their unit and weekly lesson plans ahead of time. Ahrens developed a sticker chart to track adherence and was also in the classroom for the majority of the school day. The requirement to turn in lesson plans did put another burden on teachers’ time, but “as long as feedback is given when they’re asked to turn something in, that’s the key piece,” Sandoval says. If teachers go to the trouble to turn in the lesson plans early, then receive no comments, they
may think no one’s looking at them and wonder what the point is, she adds.  

Course Correct

Catalyst-Maria leaders also found it important to reflect and course correct as the year got underway. Case in point: the writing curriculum. Initially, the team had a number of standards tied to each essay assignment. While the current research suggested that they teach grammar within the essay, Ahrens said the staff realized scholars were not at the level where teachers could delve into the appropriate use of commas within their writing. They determined students might be more successful if teachers separated out the grammar. Now, every class starts with a DOL (Daily Oral Language) exercise that is aligned to the objective for the week.

Teacher Alex Mahrt says for the second year, the staff removed one whole paper from the course entirely. Mahrt says it was helpful that the administration was open to augmenting the pacing guide for writing. “We noticed that there were so many papers they were obliged to write that things weren’t really sinking in with them,” she says. The research paper unit, which would run 6 to 7 weeks, was removed, which allowed teachers to expand the time allotted for the remaining papers. The idea was to “help scholars gain confidence in things like writing a sentence really well, and writing a paragraph really well, instead of just blasting through all of these different papers without being able to write a solid paragraph at the end of the year,” Mahrt says. “So instead of having all those different papers and maybe not as much confidence as a writer overall, we focused in more on specifics papers for a longer amount of time,” she says. The curriculum continues to be a work in progress as the staff works to make pacing guides for AP Human Geography and World History more skills-based.

“Granted, curriculum is always going to be a living breathing thing, just like educational research is,”
Earning their Black Belts

To make sure the faculty was well trained in the curriculum, the leadership hosted professional developments over the summer, then held a summer institute. In the first year, with a much smaller staff, the leadership had the opportunity to walk everyone through the school plan. “It was a lot of frontloading, talking to them about lesson planning,” says Elizabeth Ahrens, director of instruction. What teachers have to teach is outlined in the objectives, “so we coached around the how,” Ahrens says. Teacher Alex Mahrt says she received the pacing guide and text books two months before the school year started so she could prepare herself.

The Catalyst network focused its own summer institute, which involves Catalyst-Maria teachers, on literacy training, says David Baldwin, Catalyst’s vice president for internal operations and strategy. Because the school day includes a 2.5-hour daily literacy block, the network brought in two consultants to make sure teachers had the proper tools to get through it. Successful teachers were invited to model successful strategies for the literacy block, such as how to do read alouds and lead independent reading sessions. Later, the staff member would take over and be coached by the experienced teacher.

While the staff receives large doses of curricular training in the summer, they also get a taste on Friday afternoons. Students are dismissed early, clearing the afternoon for professional development. To make sure the strategies and training are being implemented with fidelity, the director of instruction and other leaders are in classrooms daily to provide immediate coaching and feedback.

To encourage teachers to own the curriculum, Ahrens meets with teachers every 2-3 months to talk about pacing guides and where they may need more or less time. “This is a constant daily thing we’re interacting with teachers on,” she says. She also encourages teacher input. “Putting their heads into the curriculum matters,” she says. For example, the school initially included a Helen Keller story in the curriculum as a way to expose kids to the struggles of people with special needs. “So often in urban schools, the focus is on struggles with gangs and violence, and we didn’t want our curriculum to be all about that,” Ahrens says. But students didn’t take to the book, and it was obvious that it needed to be replaced. Ahrens sought out teacher input in making the change. “I think that helps them become experts,” she says.
In her year and a half with the school, teacher Elizabeth Kenna says she has attended a number of conferences outside of the internal training, including sessions on RtI, AP Human Geography, and how to use primary sources to teach social studies.

Beyond the content, Kenna also found that she needed to dive deeper into the student’s perspectives when developing her lesson plans, asking herself questions like: “What do you think their background knowledge is? What research do you have to do to make sure you can help them?”

She teaches a class on ACT Prep and would use assessment data to try to understand what gaps students might have from their past school experiences. “In the sixth grade math, what did they miss? How can we bring them up to where they need to be at a rapid pace?” Kenna says.
Developing “Black Belt” Teaching

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

- Teachers use data trends from student growth and interim assessment data, checks for understanding, exit slips, and unit assessments to develop individualized learning strategies and execute the fundamentals of differentiated and small group instruction.

- Teachers communicate to students and parents an individual student’s current performance level (e.g., ACT, NWEA MAP, Lexile, Fountas and Pinnell level, or grade equivalency), current growth area, yearlong growth goals, and how to use the information.

- Teachers utilize supplemental high-dosage tutoring to strategically support struggling and high-performing students from all subgroups.

- Teachers expertly utilize a variety of technology and other programs (e.g., Accelerated Math) to strategically support struggling and high-performing students from all subgroups.

Dive Into Each Student’s Data

To understand where each student is in her 9th grade ELA class, Alex Mahrt uses the results of the diagnostic EXPLORE test students took during the summer and the ones they take again in October and May. In between, Mahrt has access to interim exams designed especially for Catalyst-Maria that have the same kind of questioning, and test the same kind of skills. Using that information, she can work on reading strategies to help scholars cope when they encounter an unfamiliar word or a difficult passage, building their confidence. Grammar practice at the beginning of every class is targeted to improving areas where they’ve demonstrated a weakness on interim tests.

Student data books help bring the students into the conversation about their own performance. As a result, the scholars start to own it. “We grew a ton last year, and they saw their hard work was paying off,” says Director of Instruction Elizabeth Ahrens. It’s reflected in their own vocabularies. “We had the most popular kid in the 9th grade last year talk about his Lexile swag,” she says. Students who made a certain point of growth on the EXPLORE earned different color bracelets. Sandoval and other faculty would approach scholars to congratulate them about their Lexile growth while also having intentional conversations with those who needed to do more work.

When staff members sat down with new students who entered the school this year from other schools, they were direct. “We were like, ‘Do you know you have a 12 on the ACT? Do you know what that means? Do you know how we need to get you to this point?’” recalls Ahrens. “So many of them had never been told. They take the standardized test and then it’s just like, ‘whatever.’ We have a really intentional data reporting system.”

Each student records all of their data on a special form. “They know the benchmarks; they set goals every time,” Ahrens says. Students also isolate exactly what strand they did better or worse on. “Scholars know where their strengths and weaknesses are, and this allows them to be actionable,” says principal intern Drew Goltermann. “We’re not hiding anything from the data.”
Before school started, Sandoval was able to group the students in a way that allowed teachers to really zero in on their needs beginning on day one.

Those intervention groups were reviewed every 10 weeks. Students with the lowest scores were assigned to extra Saturday sessions, and had to test out of the group to be released from attending, CEO Gordon Hannon says. Teacher Elizabeth Kenna says she uses data daily to plan lessons for the ACT class she teaches. She has students track their own data and identify where they need to make gains. For her AP Human Geography class, the assessments are more subjective, based on whether students can demonstrate critical thinking skills. “I’m tracking more personally,” with a combination of both AP and her own assessments, Kenna says. Many professional development sessions revolve around how to incorporate data into teachers’ classroom strategies, such as how to make tiered groups within the class and make sure to access all those tiers, says teacher Faith Le.

To help teachers improve, Sandoval and Ahrens sit down with the test results and brainstorm what can be done to stir up growth. For example, they noted in one interim data report that the staff wasn’t seeing as much success in English and maybe could add Daily Oral Language to the routine. They focused on adding DOLs around specific grammar skills in the third and fourth quarter to drive improvement.
Make Time for Data Analysis

The important element to getting staff to use the data is to give them time, says Elizabeth Ahrens, director of instruction. Sometimes entire professional development days are designated as “Data Days.” School leaders work ahead of time to craft just the right questions to make sure the discussion and analysis at the session goes in the direction it needs to go. Teachers are given forms to organize the data that also prompt them to use it in the preferred ways.

On Fridays, students are dismissed at 1:15 p.m., and teachers have professional development time from 2 to 4 p.m. The sessions rotate in focus, with some focusing on data, some bringing together teachers across grade levels, and some communicating mandatory information such as how to use an EpiPen. “Most of the time it’s things like meeting with our grade-level team and fleshing out strategies about a specific reading issue we’ve seen across our ninth-graders or seeing a specific set of students need a little more push organizationally,” says teacher Alex Mahrt. “We also spend that time as a whole team building our culture as a staff.”

The staff also meets in smaller cluster or breakout groups every other week, focusing on different topics. When the entire staff comes together on Fridays, the groups can share what they’re working on.

Though the school leaders built many professional development sessions into the schedule, it’s also important to make sure teachers are correctly using the skills and tactics they’re being taught. “You have this two-day training, everybody’s supposed to be doing this,” Ahrens says. But if leaders and coaches aren’t in the classroom seeing it being used, chances are teachers may slack or be unaware that they’re not using a technique correctly in the classroom. After the staff completed a training on Kagan small group strategies, teachers were enthusiastic about working the techniques into their day, but tended...
to focus on just a few of the 42 strategies, and ignore the others. “We needed to push them further on all of the creativity that Kagan can give us,” Ahrens says.

The first year, the staff was so small that there weren’t departments. “There was a biology teacher,” Ahrens says. Going into year two, there weren’t clear-cut department heads in some areas, so organizing teachers together around departments was not as much a part of the school’s professional development plan. But, “we’ve seen our teachers step up and really get together on their own time and use us as facilitators for that sometimes,” Ahrens says.

To avoid professional development devolving into teacher venting sessions, the PD should be focused on an objective—something the administration has done well this year, says teacher Faith Le. Sandoval says she uses surveys and information from observations to determine where she should focus PD sessions. In year two, it has been a transition to fold in the new staff members and create PD sessions to meet everyone’s needs. The first year, PD could be more targeted to the problems the small staff was facing at the moment, Le says. Now, the size of the staff requires them to focus more on general best practices.
High-Frequency Coaching

Each teacher at Catalyst-Maria is assigned an instructional coach. Depending on their performance, teachers are on different tiers. Tier 1 teachers are seen twice a week, with feedback provided in email and through a meeting. Tier 2 teachers have demonstrated excellence, so they are given a little more leeway, and only seen once every other week. They receive both email and in-person feedback following the observation. A teacher’s placement in a tier doesn’t necessarily line up with their experience level. Some seasoned teachers are Tier 1. Along with Principal Dawn Sandoval and Director of Instruction Elizabeth Ahrens, principal intern Drew Goltermann and the director of scholar support all handle observations. “We try to rely on Paul Bambrick’s six steps to effective feedback which really helps to create a continuous cycle of observation,” Goltermann says.

When they’re in the classroom, coaches are looking at culture, planning and instruction. The initial year was focused intensively on culture, “but with so many young teachers, obviously we did need to do a lot of work with the planning and instruction,” Ahrens says.

The post-observation meeting runs 30 minutes and the teacher and coach discuss goals the teacher should be working on. Teacher Alex Mahrt says one of her goals in year one was to improve on positive framing in the form of narration in her classroom. She really wanted to incorporate the technique into her own classroom but was struggling. “It just didn’t feel very fluid for me, and it was something my instructional coach was able to monitor and say ‘Here you did it! And you didn’t even realize it,’” Mahrt says. The coach helped her see that the narration doesn’t happen only one way in the classroom. “She helped me through it so I didn’t feel so awkward incorporating it in a positive way in my classroom,” she says.

The administration was careful to divide responsibilities so teachers’ coaches do not handle their evaluations. Two formal evaluations are done by another staff member, using a defined rubric.
“With the people doing the coaching, we want teachers to admit they don’t know how to do something,” says David Baldwin, a vice president for the Catalyst network. “We don’t want them to hide it. We want them to admit it and get better.”

In the first year, coaches could be in the room “pretty much constantly,” says Mahrt says. “That was a really great way for me to develop as a teacher.” Teachers were also able to be in each other’s classrooms frequently, which the staff is trying to continue this year. The benefit of peer feedback is that teachers don’t have a defined set of objectives for an observation; they can be there just as a sounding board.

Again, the school’s growing size is coming into play. “We’re realizing this year that the handholding we may have done last year is just not possible this year,” Ahrens says. The school leaders opted for the tiers this year because seeing everyone the same amount of time didn’t necessarily seem like the best use of resources. The leadership also dialed back on in-person meetings, so now teachers also receive some feedback through email. “This year we felt it’d be better to let the teacher read the email take some time, and respond as opposed to always having the face-to-face conversation,” she says.

Another focus of the observations is whether teachers have planned scholar-centered activities, to make sure scholars are doing the thinking in the classroom, not the teacher for them. One teacher with several years’ experience struggled with engaging students. “It was very much ‘you guys read the book, we will ask these questions and tomorrow will happen and we will do the same thing.’ She was really struggling with creativity,” Ahrens says. Her coach focused on expanding the teacher’s tool box, and modeling what the new strategies looked like. “Going in there and helping her plan a lesson around the different ways you teach reading to a group of kids has just been huge for her,” Ahrens says. “To go into her classroom today, the improvement is fantastic.”

Teacher Faith Le’s goal with her coach was also to move away from teacher-led activities to a student-led classroom. First, they worked on the culture of the classroom, making the lessons tighter, then planning activities where students were doing a lot more inquiry. Ahrens shared graphic organizers and other things that helped Le map out what she wanted in the classroom, then would check her lesson plans each week.

Teacher Elizabeth Kenna struggled with positive framing her first semester and admits to getting quite frustrated. Her coach would sit in the classroom and help her think through what the scholar was feeling. “Having me do a lot of reflection, then change from there, that’s when I really started to see changes,” she says.

The focus for year two of coaching is on setting one goal and seeing it through. “It’s hard to do, though, when you’re going into a first-year teacher’s classroom and you’re like ‘Omgoodness! there’s a lot we need to work on here,’” Ahrens says. With more experienced teachers, the focus of coaching might be on critical questioning or analyzing students’ responses. But even with seasoned teachers, coaches have been instructed to stay on top of pacing. “We have to make sure people are planning a 12-minute activity and it’s taking 12 minutes,” Ahrens says.
Q&A

What helped the school succeed in year one?

David Baldwin, Vice President of Internal Operations and Strategy for the Catalyst Schools: “It has a leader who absolutely knows what she wants and has built a very strong leadership team around her... That kind of clarity, vision and expectation, and how to create a culture among her faculty is key... She's good at identifying what she needs help with. She constantly asks for feedback.”

Principal Dawn Sandoval: “Through the rigorous hiring process, I believe we were able to create a team who believed in the mission of Catalyst...We had a strong curriculum from the get-go. We had excellent assessment cycles and follow-through on what they are expected to do with that data. We achieved a 3-point growth our first year; our special ed students achieved a 2-point growth. It was not perfect, but we had a very strong curriculum that was skills-based, aligned to the standards, and the assessments were aligned to that, so we were able to move our students based on those pieces.”

Director of Instruction Elizabeth Ahrens: “Fantastic teachers who were willing to buy in to what we were doing, who were willing to work really hard.”

On reading: “The intentional focus around eyes on text, balancing test-taking skills and test prep through literature, doing timed reads with kids, making our questions not strictly comprehension-based...Also, focusing on looking back at the text and using the text because we found so many of our kids just weren’t.”

On science: “It was really an intentionality around interpretation of data...Every single day, our science teachers do ‘Do Nows’ where the kids have to underline what the question is asking and reword it...Teaching kids how to read charts and graphs was extremely beneficial for them.”

On math: “Cognitive Tutor was excellent. You're looking at that self-directed curriculum two days a week, vs. teacher-directed curriculum three days a week. That balance just really worked.”
Appendix

- 2013 2014 Detailed Week 1 New Staff Detailed Calendar
- Complete Fit and Performance Matrix for Catalyst FINAL Process with Rubrics
- Experiencing Mission through a Community of Achievement and Excellence Teacher overall schedule, July 23 2013
- Parent and teacher commitment, 2013 2014 final
- Summer Institute Week 2 Detailed schedule, August 12-August 17th