A VIGILANT LEADER

Lamont Browne easily could have overwhelmed his staff with all that could be done to fix EastSide Charter School. After all, the school had rotated through four leaders in six years. Only about a quarter of the children could pass the state reading test. There was an urgent need for a school that worked. But instead of trying to tackle everything at once, the new school leader concentrated his staff’s attentions on a few important priorities and on building the right foundation for the school.

Browne dedicated himself to hiring the right people and training “the heck out of them.” He set a clear vision, secured parent support and built trust with his students by leading daily morning meetings himself. He opened each day talking about his belief in their futures and focusing them on the idea that everyone can learn. He established systems and structures that created the right environment for that learning to happen. As a result, the school’s scores shot up, with students recording a 20-percentage point gain in reading that first year. EastSide continued to build on that success, and by 2014, 58 percent of kids were proficient or better in reading, and 63 percent in math (as opposed to 37 percent three years prior.)

EastSide’s success drew the attention of Delaware’s governor and state secretary of education, who highlighted EastSide as a model for other schools serving populations with high percentages of low-income children. Founded in cooperation with the Wilmington Housing Authority, EastSide is located across the street from a public housing development, and the effects of the concentrated poverty are reflected in some of the students’ experiences. By the school’s estimate, 45 percent...
of students have experienced some kind of trauma. But here, under Browne’s direction, they were reading, adding, subtracting and thriving. In 2014, three-quarters of students were meeting annual growth goals in math, and 62 percent were doing so in reading. When a financial scandal erupted at another Delaware charter school, the state tapped Browne to help. He spent 2015-2016 working to right the ship of Family Foundations Academy and sustain the success of EastSide.

After earning a degree in business from the University of Delaware, Browne went to work in the world of finance. But after three months at a bank, he decided it was not for him. Browne found a job at his former high school teaching math, then returned to the University of Delaware, where his grad school job was to tutor students in a very diverse school. However, he noticed the eighth-grade honors section had a very different makeup than the rest of the student body. Of the honors students, only two were black. “A very diverse school, a very homogenous honors class,” he recalls. Those numbers have stuck with him as he embarked on a career to close the achievement gap. After teaching at a KIPP school, he won a spot in KIPP’s school leadership program, then led a school in Philadelphia before landing at EastSide in 2011.

Conversations overheard in the halls of EastSide have a consistent undercurrent and provide a hint to the school’s winning formula: It’s all about improvement and growth, setting a higher bar or the next goal. Teachers are coached, leaders are coached, Browne himself remains a constant learner.

Having invested a significant amount of work to build EastSide’s culture, Browne is vigilant of it. During a recent meeting, he hears an EastSide teacher raise her voice down the hall. He holds up a finger and opens the door to call to her. “We always have to model for our kids, right?” he says without raising his own voice. She apologizes and returns to her students reframed. That constant tending of culture is what his staff credits with driving the school higher each year.

In his daily interactions with staff members, Browne tries to push them toward self-reflection by consistently throwing it back to teachers. “How can you change what you did to make a positive difference?” He credits the approach with creating “a self-awareness and a self-reflective culture that allowed room for the conversation of how we can do things differently,” Browne says.

While he is often giving feedback during coaching sessions, Browne also encourages scrutiny of his own performance, including questions in those sessions about what he can do better. “It’s an open conversation. He’s never ever been shy that he wants feedback too, and he’s still getting better and growing,” says Katelyn Whelan, EastSide’s Dean of Special Education. “He’s never satisfied with where he is.”

**HIS BEST ADVICE**

You have to have a talented, hard-working and committed staff, but also it’s your job to take them to the level they need to be. I imagine some leaders are going to be in areas where there’s not a large pool of outstanding teachers just waiting, and some of them may go into schools where they can’t necessarily replace the staff. So having a structure in place to help improve capacity in everybody is super critical.

—Lamont Browne

**THE FIRST 100 DAYS**

When faced with the daunting challenge of turning around a failing school, the list of possible tasks can seem endless. Browne narrowed down the priorities to three areas of focus, a practice
that he continues each year. That first year at EastSide was about staying united, working hard and encouraging self-reflection/growth. Now all the schools he leads determine three goals or “buckets” where the staff will concentrate effort for the school year. Narrowing the priorities enabled Browne to build a solid foundation for those schools. Then when those buckets are properly addressed, the staff can move on to the next layer of goals. Year by year, he’s built on the foundation of the school.

Browne signed his contract to take over the struggling EastSide in March 2011, but wasn’t supposed to start until July. He dove in to his work right away, penning a “First 100 Days” strategic plan listing action steps and setting deadlines for himself. He set up shop in an EastSide conference room while he was on spring break from his other school. He met with every teacher in the building, then spread the word to every good teacher he knew that he was looking to hire. He sought team players with a mission-driven mindset who actively pursued a challenging school environment. He also was looking for teachers with a strong work ethic, a drive to be better and an ability to reflect on their work.

Before he made hiring decisions, Browne asked the current staff to respond to a written questionnaire, noting who submitted it on time and in total. “I can tell who does a 30-second job and who’s really put their all into it,” he says. “The teachers who are excited to do it, that told me something. The teachers who are like I’ve already been here, I shouldn’t have to reapply for my job, that tells me something else.” He asked candidates to bring in data that illustrated their success with students. They were asked to rate themselves and discuss a time when they failed. Through this interview process, “I’m looking for some humility,” he says, and for people who would fully buy in to his mission and vision.

Browne recalls one staff member who ended the interview by telling him about two other people she thought would not be the right fit for the reboot of the school. “It didn’t matter what I thought of her before that, it didn’t matter how great a teacher you are, if you’re willing to throw someone else under the bus without even being asked, you’re not a fit for my team,” he says.

The school’s leadership team had three weeks to work together on the design of the school. Browne used that time to align his leadership team around a mission to support each other—and the staff—and to hold themselves to the highest standards. “Too often leaders hold teachers to a high standard but not themselves. I felt like we cannot ask anything of our staff that we don’t ask of ourselves,” Browne says. Instead of toiling in his principal office alone, Browne pulled all five leaders’ desks together in a group office so they could meet and work in close proximity for eight hours a day every day. “By the time teachers came back from professional development, the leadership team was just in sync. We knew each other very well and knew where we were going and what we were doing,” he says. The first day teachers reported to school,
he had the leadership team dress in full suits, even though it was summer, which typically calls for more casual dress. He wanted to set the standard that "we are professionals, we have to treat ourselves and hold ourselves accountable to being professionals," Browne says. But the team leaders donned aprons over their suits so they could cook the staff breakfast the first day, which has become an EastSide tradition.

Teachers had a full two weeks of orientation before classes started to learn how things would be done at EastSide. Every day started with 30 to 60 minutes of team-building activities. Remaining sessions aimed to make clear to teachers what was expected of them. They drilled down into the mission statement, the school climate, backward planning, school arrival procedures, and how to roll out the first two weeks of school. Other sessions sought to answer questions such as "What should my room look like?"

Browne’s natural charisma and energy level helped excite the staff about the vision he had set, staff members say. "He got you hyped during those first few professional developments so you were like I’m so excited to be part of this," says Katelyn Whelan, who followed Browne to EastSide from the previous school where they both worked. "Obviously we’ve had to expand upon what does this mean and be more specific, but in the beginning it could literally be this is going to be something and people were excited about that. We were like we’re not going to get shut down in a year because that’s where we were at."

Students returned to school a week earlier than most children at other Delaware schools. They had a week of half days, while the staff used the afternoons to continue professional development sessions. "By the time you had your first full day with kids, you had undergone 100 hours of professional development, maybe more," Browne says. "I think that is when the staff saw organization, they saw teamwork and that made a big difference."

To signify to the community a complete restart, Browne had a friend with graphic design talents redesign the logo, then changed all the colors, all the uniforms, and the look of the school. Gone were the retro blue and pepto pink walls. The old uniforms were only available through a specific distributor and parents had to travel to buy them, so Browne switched to simple black pants and a polo shirt with the EastSide logo. He located a vendor who would make the shirts and offered the uniforms for sale in the school. "Parents felt the things they had stressed were listened to and acted upon, which I think brought parents in," Browne says.

The new design for the school included a longer school day as well as an early dismissal on Friday to build in time for weekly professional development. "I knew that in order to have the culture that was needed and the skill set of our staff, we had to train them. A three-hour professional development once every two months after school just wasn’t sufficient," Browne says. Instead, the staff had training from 1 to 4:15 p.m. every Friday for the entire school year.

Lamont Browne was presented his Ryan Award in person by Pat Ryan, Founder, (right) and Nora Ligurotis, CEO, (left).

Browne remembers small moments that first year when he’d pull a staff member aside to point out that the middle school floor was quiet and no one was running around. But he concedes it was a struggle. He could see in late October that the staff was suffering from burnout as they’d taken on new
tasks and roles and were working incredibly hard. He directed the members of the leadership team to each relieve a teacher for at least one hour for a break. But when Browne approached the teacher he had selected to relieve, she took his action as a signal that she was in trouble or going to be fired. The fact that she couldn’t trust that he was trying to give her a well-deserved reward signaled to Browne that the leadership had a lot more work to do to build trust. He continued to try to work in small rewards.

Whelan recalls Browne driving home the point that the school was not run by a leader and his underlings, but by a leadership team. “It was the idea that one man can’t do it all. We all each have things we’re good at,” Whelan says. The Friday professional development time also signaled a change. “It helped staff see from the start that this was going to be different because every week we were going to learn something new or get better at something and we were going to be supported throughout the week on how we were doing with it,” she says.

The organizational chart Browne devised for EastSide also made clear where the focus would be. The students are at the top of the chart, instead of the leader or the school board.

YEAR TWO AND BEYOND: THE IMPORTANCE OF ‘YET’

After realizing some initial success, Browne turned the staff’s focus to the idea of “yet.” It was meant to remind the staff that “we haven’t mastered that lesson or that curriculum yet, but we will,” Browne says. He didn’t want teachers to get discouraged by the continued hard work required, so he also pushed the importance of perseverance. He set high expectations but also held himself accountable. It was not unusual to see him stand in front of the staff and say “here’s what I need to do better.” To keep the staff accountable, he created trackers and insisted on data to keep everyone on task. He made clear what good teaching and practice looked like with rubrics that spell everything out.

In year two, the goal shifted to moving the school from “good to great,” and that required adjustments. Browne kept the early dismissal time on Fridays to allow for continued professional development. But once a month, he would close the building at 1 p.m. to force teachers to go home and relax. “Things like that went a long way,” Browne says. In year one and two, Browne was visible everywhere—with students in classrooms or shaking hands in the front of the school, recalls Nick Medaglio, now director of finance and operations. While he remained visible in year three, he didn’t have to do as much of that. “I think that’s when he was like I really have everyone brought on board. He didn’t have to be the person everywhere in the building,” says Medaglio.

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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 resisters.
- 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.
As he welcomed new principals to the leadership team with the takeover of Family Foundations Academy, Browne made sure to set structures to keep those leaders accountable, too. He meets with the new principals every week to review the three “buckets” and he asks for them to articulate what’s going well and what’s not, says Rachel Valentin, principal of the elementary school for Family Foundations Academy. “I think those targeted questions under the umbrella of our school goals really help us stay aligned,” she says. Browne accompanies Valentin on walk-throughs of the school and provides feedback after observing her coaching sessions. He also has the principals bring in metrics to show progress toward their schoolwide goals, while the evaluation and coaching systems Browne instituted helps them benchmark teachers’ progress toward individual goals, Valentin says.

Staff members say Browne is open to changing what’s not working. “At a lot of schools, you’ll hear ‘well that’s not how we do things here,’ or ‘that’s not what we used to do,’ or they just get caught up in the structures,” says Rachael Staab, Assistant Principal of EastSide. “If there’s something else we can do that we’re not doing now, we throw it away and we make a plan and do it. Whether it’s in the summer or it’s in October or in January, we’re always thinking about how we can alter things or do things differently to meet our kids’ needs in the best way and that drives everything we do.”

CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP EVEN EARLIER: After the success with the elementary school, there was pressure for EastSide to expand to the high school level, but Browne decided instead that the staff needed to reach children earlier to attack the achievement gap before they even entered elementary school. The kindergarten teachers had noted children entering school not knowing their name and testing at a two-year-old level. It led to a rambunctious, chaotic kindergarten class with many high-need kids. He brought in Rachael Staab to create the early learning center. In the first year, 95 percent of students in the early learning center passed a kindergarten readiness exam, with nearly a third of the children measuring more than ready for kindergarten. That was a contrast to the children who would previously show up for kindergarten not knowing their ABCs or how to hold a pencil.

A TEAM GROWS AT EASTSIDE

Browne ascribes a lot of the school’s success to a rigorous hiring process, which he designed to identify teachers who would be a good fit with his vision. Pre-interview questions present applicants with situations where students are failing or a large section of the class is struggling with a concept. Candidates are tested with questions such as: Who’s to blame? How should you respond? They are also asked to reflect on a time they failed as a teacher.

During a typical interview day, teachers are thoroughly vetted. They start by teaching a sample lesson, then take part in an instructional coaching session. That is followed by a debrief about the coaching session. The candidates are interviewed by groups of teachers, parents and student council members, and also will be given lunch duty or some other task that shows how they handle groups of students. After a professional development session, they will have a formal interview with school leaders.
Rachel Valentin, whom Browne brought on to serve as Principal at Family Foundations Academy’s elementary school, says the intense screening and interview process signals to candidates what they’re signing on for. “You’re already immersing them in the culture of feedback before they even start,” she says.

To identify candidates who will be a good fit with the team, the staff also uses a fit-performance matrix developed with the help of Ryan Fellow Owen Ricciardi, who worked at EastSide under Browne and now leads his own school. Says staff member Katelyn Whelan: “It’s hard to work here. And it’s not for everybody.” A teacher could be really great but not have what it takes to work in an urban school. Or, “you can be a semi-good teacher but truly know this population and get what it takes to be here and work with these kids, so we like to have that matrix to merge the two,” she says.

Maureen Thomas, Director of Talent, says Browne doesn’t ask staff to do anything he wouldn’t do himself, including picking up trash. It sends a message: “If you walk by and you see something, don’t walk by it, pick it up. This is where you work, where you breathe, where you live, you spend all this time with the staff, enjoy it,” she explains of his approach. To fold in new teachers to the staff, Browne invites them to teach during the summer so they can be exposed to the coaching model and get acclimated to the structures and systems. That way, their first day of the school year is not really their first day at EastSide.

With the “team” being so important to the school’s success, Browne is sure to build in activities, events and celebrations that nurture staff relationships. The intense orientation sessions teachers attend before students arrive definitely help create a family feeling for the staff, says Nick Medaglio, who started as a teacher at EastSide. “We still have this family feeling. We refer to ourselves as the EastSide family,” he says.

The inclusion of frequent coaching sessions not only helps teachers improve their craft, but “the idea of cultivating a culture of feedback changes the way your school operates all the time,” says Assistant Principal Rachael Staab. When staff members are reflective and open to improvement, “it creates an environment where people are not afraid of it or they’re not defensive, whether it’s your peer or your leader or whoever it is,” she says. “In most schools that doesn’t happen because teachers are so afraid of getting in trouble or someone’s going to think I’m not good at my job. Here, teachers beg me, please come in.”

DON’T IGNORE THE LITTLE THINGS

Browne stands before the group of teachers, who are all decked out for college shirt day. He apologizes for not having been around as much because of the absorption of the Family Foundations Academy schools. But he says he couldn’t help but notice the late start time of this
week’s professional development sessions, which always start on the dot. The eight-minute delay might not mean much in some schools, but it does here. Browne uses it as an example to show his staff they still can’t afford to slack off—even on minor things.

“Our kids, who are some of the most brilliant, passionate and sometimes challenging kids in the world to work with, deserve excellence from every single one of us and we have not been excellent,” he says. “Sometimes it’s not good to look at the past and sometimes it is...I don’t remember a single PD not starting at exactly 1:30 in four-plus years,” he says, as staff members nod.

He sees danger in seemingly small things clouding the environment they worked so hard to build, and in his team members not holding themselves up to the highest bar. When teachers find students aren’t following routines, it’s not because kids suddenly decided one day not to follow routines, he says.

“It’s because the expectation either wasn’t created or upheld,” he says. “If we think about all the procedures, policies, structures and expectations we have, I’m willing to bet that every one of us here can find there’s something I’m not driving toward to the extent that I could,” he says.

He apologizes for not being as present, then asks everyone to pull out a card and write down the phrase: “I own...” He instructs them to plug in an area where they know they’re not holding themselves up to high standards. Then to write “I commit to...”

Immediately one staff member offers a response. “One of the things I’ve come to realize that I struggle with has been follow-up because it seems there’s so much going on you lose track of what someone just handed to you. You can kind of forget it because other things pop up. I need to be sure I track my time and make sure and go back and check that I did get back to a person in good time,” the dean says, to which there are immediate snaps around the room to indicate agreement.

**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.

Others jump in with their own pledges. Then Browne asks them to write down a question or idea or statement they want to share with him and he pledges to read all of them.

“There’s a huge push to be our best. I hope it’s coupled easily, and hopefully more so, with love and support as we create a greater environment not just for our kids but for us. We spend a whole lot of time here. We recognize, I recognize, not just the challenge you’re overcoming every day to work here but how much of yourself you’re giving to this hard work,” he says.

**FIRST UP: ORDER**

The school environment was unstructured and chaotic when they took over, recalls Katelyn Whelan, Dean of Special Education. The leadership team instituted a schoolwide positive behavior
system, combined with some Uncommon Schools’ practices, to establish more order. The staff saw tremendous improvement once kids finally had some structure, Whelan says.

From the start of the year, students are taught the EastSide way. The first two weeks are focused on making sure students have down the routines, with a strict emphasis on enforcing uniform codes, behavior rules and nightly homework to create a culture where the students are not distracted by things that elsewhere may derail the classroom environment.

When it started, EastSide operated on a system that called on teachers to assign each student a color based on their behavior that day. Students also could earn points for awards or special opportunities. In subsequent years, EastSide transitioned to a behavior system that included character education. The new “crew” system is based on the idea that “we are crew, not passengers. It’s an all-in philosophy. The idea of we’re all in this one boat together,” Whelan says. Teachers incorporate lessons on collaboration, persistence, responsibility and courage. The crew system also provides each student with another adult mentor. Crew meetings are held for roughly 20 to 30 minutes each morning.

The deans work with the special education staff and school psychologist to get to the bottom of any obstacles that might be affecting students with behavior needs. If necessary, the matter moves to special education staff members who consider whether the student needs an Individualized Education Program. But the staff is pressed to be specific. It’s not just “this kid is having problems,” Whelan says. It’s “what exactly is this child struggling with? How do we know they’re not doing well? I’m always asking that why so (teachers) know not to even talk about it unless they know the why. They’re not doing well with this, this and this, and we’ve tried this, this and this. That’s the philosophy and mindset because that’s how we do our action plans, that’s how we do our lesson planning, how we do everything.”

The school psychologist leads trainings on trauma and ADHD strategies to also empower teachers with tools to help them differentiate to meet the needs of diverse learners. If students have overstimulation or sensory issues, “let’s get them a sensory box, let’s make sure the classroom is set up in an ideal way for them and just make their learning environment conducive to them,” Whelan says. “It doesn’t necessarily mean they need this huge big plan all of the time, sometimes they just need you to teach a little differently or help change the environment a little bit.”

I CAN SEE YOUR FUTURE

When Alexis Simms transferred her daughter to EastSide after Browne’s first year, she immediately was impressed with the atmosphere and the high bar the staff set for kids. “They pushed her; they challenged her,” she says. When her daughter was in fourth grade, Browne asked her what she would do if she won the highest number of points in a schoolwide challenge. The girl replied that she wanted to sit in Dr. Browne’s office chair. “When she earned all those points, he rolled his chair down to her classroom,” she recalls with a laugh.

Teachers’ rooms are named after their college alma mater, and college shirt days and other events focus students’ attention on the end goal. To enroll students in his vision, Browne took the stage before the whole student body every school morning at 7:55 a.m. “We talked every day about...
high expectations, why education was important, and celebrated their success,” Browne says. He awarded public “roses” to spotlight individual kids and classes doing well. While he set high expectations, he also emitted a confidence that everyone could meet that high bar.

The staff worked hard to get students excited about academics and taking tests. “They changed their perspective, they made it like a game, a challenge,” says parent Erica Salahudin. A whole week of spirit events kept the momentum going, and the students were encouraged to set their own personal goals. “Kids would self-motivate to do better to get to a higher level. They encouraged them to do that,” she says. At honor roll assemblies, the students who didn’t make it did not receive a message that they would never get there. Rather it was, “you’re just not there yet,” she says.

The environment was one of continual learning for everyone, students and adults alike. Browne encouraged his staff to push themselves and several teachers went on to become school leaders under his tutelage. The staff also was open to new ideas, says Salahudin. “If this wasn’t working, they’d try something else,” she says.

To build relationships with families, Browne sent a weekly bulletin home. Teachers were instructed to make a personal phone call to every student’s family regarding report card conferences, which Browne credits with getting parents more invested. Parents say the staff also made them feel part of the team. The leadership kept parents informed of the school’s progress. “When they did any kind of presentation for parents—open houses, the spring concert, award ceremonies— they always put a big emphasis on where the school was and where everyone knew the school could be,” Simms says. “You could see these big improvements in behavior or test scores. It was promising to see.”

Salahudin, who sent her youngest three children to EastSide, says the openness and availability of the staff stood out to her right away. “I never experienced anything like that with my two older children in school,” she says. “They gave us their cell phone numbers. Dr. Browne gave us his cell phone number and said if you have any concerns call him at any time.”

Some of the parents who had children under the old administration may not have welcomed change. “There may have been some resistance, but they knew something needed to be done,” Salahudin says. “I think because of their communication everyone was willing to give it a chance to see how the new system would go.”

Browne dedicated himself to hiring the right people and training “the heck out of them.” He set a clear vision, secured parent support and built trust with his students by leading daily morning meetings himself.

In the beginning, Salahudin remembers Browne as more firm because “he was just starting out and the kids had to understand he meant business. But I still think he was approachable and respectful of the kids. He gave them respect, so they gave it back,” she says.

The real difference at the school was the team he built. “We could see as parents they really cared about our kids,” Salahudin says. She recalls getting a phone call from her son’s teacher one day—not because of something wrong he did in class—but because of a small improvement his teacher had noted in his social interactions. “I was concerned with him not speaking up, if he was making friends. Mr. Ricciardi called me once and said he did great in class, he’s encouraging other kids now, he’s coming out of his shell and he’s helping other kids. I was really happy and I was
proud he was starting to transition and get more comfortable with himself,” Salahudin says. “For him to call and tell me that, that was awesome.”

COLLECT THE EVIDENCE

Browne’s systems reinforce the importance of gathering, reviewing and acting on student data. That’s made clear from the very first interaction. Pre-interview questions ask teachers to respond to data points or discuss student gains using data. During orientation every year, Browne leads data trainings and is clear in his communications and questioning about the need for evidence.

The school’s regular assessment schedule means “there should be no surprises,” Browne says. “You’re held accountable to showing improvement but also you’re aligning your instruction to the assessments. We try to be transparent; we show (teachers) the test six weeks before they take it so that they know what adjustments they need to make to their instruction.” If assessment results show only half of the class mastered something, teachers can’t make the excuse that they didn’t teach the class the skill, or that they have plans to teach it later. “You knew it was going to be assessed,” Browne says. “It helps add buy-in and credibility to the data.”

To supply team members with the data they need, EastSide administers Amplify, a Common Core-aligned assessment, at the beginning and end of the year and four times in between. The staff also uses MAP testing at the beginning of the year and the end, says Katelyn Whelan, Dean of Special Education. Both tests are used to measure growth. The Smarter Balanced test is administered every spring as required by the state of Delaware.

While there is a heavy emphasis on data, Browne says—and staff members back him up—that the culture is not one where assessments are used to catch teachers in a “gotcha situation.” “We know what it’s going to look like, we know what your metrics are and we can plan accordingly. I want teachers to feel we’re here to support them,” Browne says.

DATA DEEP DIVES

Every six weeks, the staff does a deep dive into interim assessment results. Teachers receive a comprehensive data report detailing student performance in their classes. They then must fill out a template that prompts them to analyze the data and create an instructional action plan for how they’re going to adjust their instruction for the next six-week cycle. Teachers must detail how they will help each level of learner improve. When complete, the teacher turns the data analysis into his or her instructional coach. Instructional coaches have the same data and also do a data analysis of their own prior to the meeting. The coach compares the two data reports and then plans a coaching session to improve the teachers’ ability to identify the high-leverage trends. “That is how we have taught teachers and because they’re having those check-in data analysis meetings frequently, they’re able to improve their practice,”

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.

- You knew it was going to be assessed,” Browne says. “It helps add buy-in and credibility to the data.”

- We know what it’s going to look like, we know what your metrics are and we can plan accordingly. I want teachers to feel we’re here to support them,” Browne says.

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- The staff does a deep dive into interim assessment results. Teachers receive a comprehensive data report detailing student performance in their classes. They then must fill out a template that prompts them to analyze the data and create an instructional action plan for how they’re going to adjust their instruction for the next six-week cycle. Teachers must detail how they will help each level of learner improve. When complete, the teacher turns the data analysis into his or her instructional coach. Instructional coaches have the same data and also do a data analysis of their own prior to the meeting. The coach compares the two data reports and then plans a coaching session to improve the teachers’ ability to identify the high-leverage trends. “That is how we have taught teachers and because they’re having those check-in data analysis meetings frequently, they’re able to improve their practice,”

- The school’s regular assessment schedule means “there should be no surprises,” Browne says. “You’re held accountable to showing improvement but also you’re aligning your instruction to the assessments. We try to be transparent; we show (teachers) the test six weeks before they take it so that they know what adjustments they need to make to their instruction.” If assessment results
Browne says. He also will step in to the meetings to observe the coaches and provide feedback on how they may better help teachers improve their response to data.

Accountability measures are built into the action plans so the teacher and coach can make sure their plans are actually effective in class. For example, during one data meeting, teachers in one grade decided they needed to build more performance tasks into their lesson plans. After reviewing assessment results, the team realized that “it was new for kids because they’re used to sort of compartmentalizing: I learn this, I do this. I learn this, I do this, and this sort of makes them pull from different things and apply it to something that seems entirely separate but it is actually aligned,” says Assistant Principal Rachael Staab. The staff found the kids were not ready for that process at all. Teachers found ways to infuse performance tasks into the lessons and the curriculum they already had so it was a part of their daily practice. During coaching and team meetings, leaders would check in on how well previous plans worked.

The staff uses assessment data not only to move individual students but also to recognize trends that might move the whole school. During the second year, Browne and the leadership team analyzed the assessment results and noticed a big trend when it came to multi-step problems in math. Students were answering the first step of the problem correctly but not the second step, and it was happening schoolwide. They focused in as a staff and the math teachers brainstormed new ways to teach students how to work through all steps of an entire word problem.

The emphasis on data is now being pushed down to the student level. “If they get their math test back, it will have each question then it will say ‘Did you make a simple mistake or did you have a misunderstanding?’” Staab says. If it’s a simple mistake, students work through it again. If it’s a misunderstanding, there are centers in the room labeled by standards and they go to that center and work with their peers on the standard they weren’t understanding. The teacher may run small groups to reteach the skill. “It’s been a really powerful practice to have kids start thinking about this grade on here means something, it means I’m either not understanding something or I’m not thinking through everything,” Staab says. In some classes, students who have mastered a skill will run a center and teach their peers about it.

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**Black Belt Teaching**

**OBJECTIVE**

Teachers effectively plan and implement the curriculum.

**DRIVERS:**

- Curriculum includes a vertical scope and sequence aligned to standards and guides teacher planning.
- Teacher and student schedules maximize student learning and teacher development.
- Whole group instruction is engaging, rigorous and aligned to standards.
- Students receive individualized or small-group instruction based on assessment outcomes.
- Data trends from assessments, observations, and walkthroughs are used to support teacher effectiveness through whole school professional development.
- Staff receive frequent coaching and valuable feedback on their teaching performance.

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A SCHEDULE WITH IMPACT

As they brainstormed how to confront the challenges of the first year, school leaders extended the number of class hours and sought ways to maximize instructional time. They added roughly 45 minutes to the school day, starting at 7:30 a.m. with breakfast and ending at 3:55 p.m. The total instructional time probably increased by more than that because of the improvements made to create a more structured environment, staff members say.
Browne freed up time for weekly professional development by dismissing students at 12:30 p.m. on Fridays. The staff operated on the extended day schedule for the first two years. “When you’re about to get shut down, it was ‘we need as many hours as we can get,’ and we weren’t really sure what we were dealing with,” says Katelyn Whelan, Dean of Special Education. But once the scores improved, leadership reduced the length of the day to give teachers a break. “It was really long,” Whelan says. They were worried about burnout and how to sustain the team after the first couple grueling years. “We realized we could fit our day in a shorter amount of time if we were more strategic with what we do,” she says. Lunch and recess were both shortened a bit, and class time for “specials” like gym or art was reduced to 50 minutes from a full hour.

To create planning time, other staff members were asked to cover lunch and recess duty so teachers could be freed up for that block of time, giving them 45 minutes of planning a day. Teachers also were given roughly an hour of planning while their class attended specials. Altogether, the teachers have 1 hour and 45 minutes of planning time a day, says Assistant Principal Rachael Staab. Teachers meet twice a week with their team during that time and can determine whether to use the other days for additional team work or for solo time in their own classrooms.

**MAKING THE MINUTES COUNT**

During the first six weeks, all members of the leadership team are in the hallways during transitions to give teachers real-time feedback about ways to cut down on transitions and maximize instructional time, Staab says. It might be that a teacher needs to pick up her students one minute earlier from specials because the classroom location in the building means it’s taking more than five minutes for children to travel between classes. “Our routines and procedures get a lot tighter by giving that real-time feedback, and by our presence in the hallways. But we also plan to the minute,” Staab says.

Lesson plan templates guide teachers to think through how they’re going to introduce the learning goal, engage the students in the initial activity and so on. With the templates, teachers can make sure every part of their lesson plan is planned out to eliminate lag time, Staab says. On Thursdays, teachers turn in lesson plans for the week ahead. Instructional coaches review them and flag areas where activities may take longer than the teacher anticipates, then offer ideas on how to tighten them.

When Browne took over leadership of the two Family Foundations Academy schools as well, teachers there noticed a change once they implemented some of EastSide’s systems. “Everything was so well thought out even down to just breakfast and lunch,” says teacher Karlee Reffuge. “Last year, breakfast was 45 minutes long, and this year they got it to 20 minutes long.” Crucial instructional time was saved, as that extra 25 minutes could go to reading or math lessons. But to create the right structure to maximize instructional time, “I’m sure (Browne and his team) walked this building 100 times, probably more than that, to figure out the best way to get kids to the classroom, to the lunchroom,” Reffuge says. They also pushed teachers to make use of every minute. She now reviews vocabulary or spelling words during those quick moments moving the kids from their desks to the carpet or vice versa. “You wouldn’t think those 30 seconds or those two minutes mean anything but they do and that’s even maximizing instruction,” she says.

**LINING IT ALL UP**

For the first few years, teachers created their own curriculum, pulling from various existing programs because students were so far below grade level and had so many diverse needs, according to Staab.

As the school transitioned to Common Core, the staff adopted EngageNY, created by the New York State Education Department to support schools moving toward the Common Core and data-driven instruction. The program is comprehensive but doesn’t box the teachers in, Staab says. “It
gives you all the standards you have to teach, all the materials, all the books you need but you determine the pacing, you determine when you do what activities, everything’s editable,” she says. The leadership team also appreciated that the curriculum was aligned from grade level to grade level. So what a student learns in third grade matches what he or she is going to learn in fourth grade.

Backward planning is key, and during orientation, teachers are led through sessions on the importance of curriculum mapping, writing unit plans and aligning them to Common Core State Standards. They also receive training on connecting assessments to those standards. When teachers do their data analysis, they must fill out prompts where they isolate each standard that students did not master then try to reach a conclusion about where the misunderstanding lies. In their plans for reteaching, teachers are prompted to identify each standard they are working on.

SMALL-GROUP INSTRUCTION

The six-week assessment cycle helps teachers check in with, and stay on top of, students who may show signs of a struggle. Whelan says that once assessment results are in, the teachers assign each student to the appropriate level so they can be properly grouped. Meetings and professional developments are used to sharpen data analysis skills and help teachers better use the results to place students in the right groups.

As the staff drives toward a goal of students leading their own learning, small groups play a large role. “For that to happen, there has to be collaborative groups happening and concentric circles and students working in partners and pairs,” Whelan says. The staff attempts to revise small groups about every six to seven weeks.

AND NOW FOR EFFECTIVE STAFF PD...

With weekly professional development time set aside on Friday afternoons, Browne and the leadership team organize the calendar for professional development before the school year starts. It’s built off the goals the leadership team has set for the year. For example, one year the three goals were: mastery of standards and skills, student character and high-quality student work, and the professional development calendar reflected that.

But the leadership remains flexible, especially if regular visits to the classroom spotlight gaps that might be buildingwide. Rachel Valentin, principal of Family Foundations Academy’s elementary school, says that if she notices student engagement is down, she will build sessions into the professional development calendar to address that.

“When Dr. Browne meets with us, he’ll ask us what are those themes underneath those umbrella items and I’ll say you know since I’ve observed this week 4 out of the 10 teachers are really struggling with questioning, we’ll think about is this something we can offer as professional development to the teachers because that’s going to help close another gap?” Valentin says.

Under Browne’s leadership at FFA, Refugio has noticed the professional development hours have been more meaningful. “In the past it just felt like we were wasting our time, it wasn’t targeted. There would be some data things but nothing that really stuck with us. Whereas our PDs now, we’re even analyzing practice data,” she says. During one of the first professional development sessions, the staff analyzed the third-grade data, demonstrating to teachers what is expected when analyzing data so it’s not varying from teacher to teacher and grade to grade.

HIGH-FREQUENCY COACHING

Each EastSide teacher is assigned an instructional coach with a goal of biweekly observations. During regular meetings, the coach offers detailed feedback according to the Teaching Excellence Framework, a teacher evaluation and professional development program. EastSide worked with a few other charter schools to earn approval from the state to use the Teaching Excellence
Framework as an alternative to the traditional teacher evaluation system that in the past has rated almost every teacher in the state as “effective” or “highly effective”—despite student achievement data that suggests otherwise. The framework details what teaching looks like when a teacher is being ineffective, developing, effective or highly effective in a wide range of categories, from setting instructional goals to checks for understanding. The observations are unannounced and often recorded to be reviewed during the coaching session.

During feedback meetings, the coach starts by highlighting something positive from the observation. “Sometimes our best people are the ones who push themselves the most and don’t realize how they’ve been successful, so having every meeting like that, I think helps maintain this positive environment where we’re pushed to be our best but also celebrated for how successful we’ve been,” Browne says. Praise is followed with questions designed to spark self-reflection. Together, teacher and coach develop an action plan, then plot out how they will monitor execution of the plan.

The inclusion of one specific action step helps teachers better focus their energies, staff members say. After one session, Refugue says she knew there were about 20 different things the coach could have flagged for improvement during her observation. “But she picked out one main thing, which was aligning my lesson more to the objective than I had,” Refugue says. “They give you one action step to take so you’re not overwhelmed and it’s manageable.”

This type of “coaching” model builds teachers who are much more self-aware, Browne says. “They’re now making changes not because someone told them to, but because they fully understand why it’s best, which means they have more ownership of it. If our leaders do a good job of giving specific action steps that are measurable and able to be mastered in a quick period of time, we’re seeing teachers being able to improve their practice,” he says.

The recordings can help teachers coach themselves. For example, one teacher watched a video of himself giving directions to the class and could see right away that he wasn’t being clear. He was able to make an immediate change to improve his instruction.

School leaders are coached also, driving home the “idea that everyone can get better,” Browne says. That applies to the top as well, as Browne may record himself in a coaching session and put it up on a screen for leaders to critique.

Browne exported this high-frequency coaching approach to the Family Foundations Academy campuses, which Valentin says has been powerful. “Now we’re in the classrooms more often and we’re giving the teachers really clear guidelines for how to improve instruction that’s ultimately going to impact student achievement,” Valentin says. “If you’re only going in a few times a year, you can’t really coach and see if the person is developing. A great coach is with you side by side.”

During a feedback meeting with LaRetha Odumosu, principal of Family Foundations Academy middle school, Browne hands her a chart with categories and asks her to rate her performance in a coaching session that he observed. As part of the session, Odumosu had the teacher practice what they’d agreed on as the next action step. “The practice

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went well. *The teacher walked out knowing exactly what she needs to do to roll that out,* Odumosu says, and Browne agrees: *"I thought your practice was outstanding."* And for the next half hour they have an in-depth discussion about what others might see as small matters in the classroom, but that they know can impact instruction.

During the conversation, Odumosu identifies how she should have better approached the session, by thinking through what the action step should be. Odumosu ended up changing the action step on the spot because she noticed during the observation the teacher actually needed to master a different step first.

*"That’s the genesis for a really good session. She had no idea that you planned a different action step or different practice for that and it was incredibly smooth. I give you kudos for being able to adjust something you thought was higher leverage,"* Browne says.

They transition into a discussion about how to make sure the teacher is not lowering her expectations for students. He also asks how Odumosu will keep the teacher accountable to that action step, and encourages her to communicate specific timelines to the teacher.

They both type notes into their computers after agreeing on her next action step, then she identifies what she sees as her weakness in the feedback cycle. They agree she will be specific about tying dates to the follow-up documentation to keep the teacher accountable.

*"Quick check for me…what is one thing from me you feel like I’ve done well in our session so far that has been helpful for you that I should continue doing?"* he asks.

She says his questioning, which helps her to think through the issues.

*"What’s one thing you think I can do a better job of?"* he asks.

She pauses and says that sometimes the challenging questions can go both ways.

*"Sometimes I think what answer do you want?"*

*"So determining when to just say it?"* he says, and she nods. The session ends with both of them committing their agreed steps and dates to paper.

In July 2016, Browne started as executive director of the Office of Autonomous Schools for Aurora Public Schools in Colorado. He turned the reins of EastSide and FFA schools over to Aaron Bass, a former colleague whom Browne recommended to the board.
Training New Leaders

When former U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan visited the state in 2014, the governor took him to visit EastSide Charter School and held it up as a school overcoming the obstacles presented by poverty. So when a financial scandal forced out the administration at Family Foundations Academy’s charter schools, the state looked to Browne to take over the FFA schools in January 2015. When the state board of education voted to turn over FFA to Browne’s leadership, the News Journal reported that one board member said: “If not for Dr. Browne being involved in this, I would in no way be in support of this,” before adding: “I have the utmost faith in this young man and what he can do.”

Browne spent the 2015-16 school year training new principals and trying to implement consistent systems and structures at the FFA schools. With three new leaders to onboard, he scheduled weekly 2.5-hour meetings with each principal for in-depth coaching.

“His job was to settle everyone down,” says Rachel Valentin, whom he hired as principal of FFA’s elementary school. He did a great job of introducing new leaders to the board and parents, she says. “Almost everyone is involved in the hiring process, that was his way of proving to the community ‘Hey I’m not just hiring folks on my own, I’m bringing you into this so you can make a decision as well’ and I really, really liked that because I ended up speaking to like 20 people that day, and every single person had a stake in the decision of bringing me in,” she says. Those moves went a long way toward getting the community and parents to buy in.

When LaRetha Odumosu observed FFA’s middle school before taking over as principal, she found “school systems were on paper but weren’t actually carried out in reality.” She worked with Browne to determine the school’s three focus areas for the year, which they also refer to as “buckets.” “Everything we do will drive toward those buckets. We’re not going to choose 10 things, we’re going to choose three. We’re going to drive those three all year and if we get to the end of the year and they’re not great, those will be our buckets again,” she says.

Valentin also selected three “buckets” of focus: systems and routines, instruction and team-building. “So every time I stand in front of the staff, I’m aligning the professional development to one of those goals,” Valentin says. “If there’s an issue that comes up, we’re flexible, but we try to see where the alignment is with the bigger buckets, bigger goals—is this a systems issue, is this an instructional issue or is this a team-building situation?”

Accountability measures are built in to everything and data is part of the daily operation. “We have a lot of discussion around what is the plan, how are you sticking to the goal, how are you messaging the goal to your leaders and then how are the leaders in turn empowering the teachers,” Valentin says.

The new staff appreciated Browne’s transparency upon taking over, says Monique Dolcy, dean of culture at FFA’s elementary school. “Sometimes you have a leader and you don’t know how to approach them, you don’t know what they’re thinking, what they’re going to say. I know what he’s expecting and I know when he’s disappointed. And I know how to fix it. There’s never a task I’m given that either I walk away unclear of how to execute it or I walk away feeling as if I’m going to fail at it,” she says.