

School District of Philadelphia

School Redesign Initiative

Case Study: Carnell

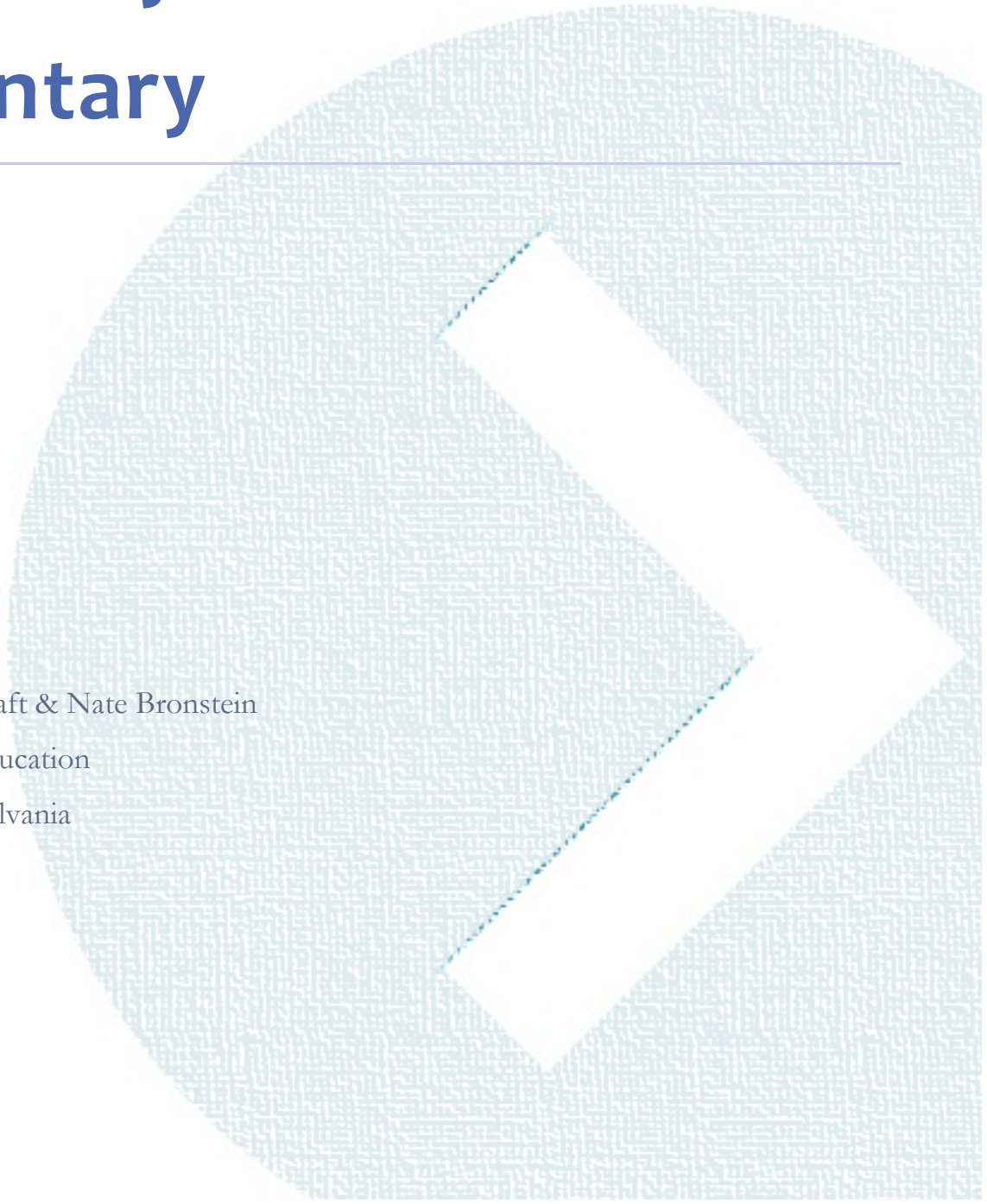
Elementary

Claire Robertson-Kraft & Nate Bronstein

Operation Public Education

University of Pennsylvania

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School Overview

Background

Carnell is a K-5 school in the Oxford Circle neighborhood of Philadelphia that serves a diverse student body of 1,025 students. The school is led by Principal Hilderbrand Pelzer III, who arrived in 2012. At that time, the District described the school as being "in crisis." Indeed, the school consistently performed poorly on state assessments and experienced repeated behavioral and organizational issues.

During Principal Pelzer's first year, he led Carnell's reconfiguration from K-8 to K-5, as part of the District's Facilities Master Plan. This decision helped to place the school on an upward improvement trajectory over the last three years as measured by the District's School Progress Report (SPR). For example, the school's overall SPR peer rank increased from 20th to 2nd when compared with 22 schools that serve similar populations.

The school's history of poor academic performance, coupled with its incremental attempts to change in Principal Pelzer's first three years leading the school, made a redesign aptly timed.

| Demographics | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| African American | 57% |
| Asian | 9% |
| Latino | 24% |
| White and other | 3% |
| Economically Disadvantaged | 95% |
| English Language Learners | 13% |
| Special Education (IEP) | 18% |

| School Performance Report (SPR) Summary | | |
|---|---------|---------|
| | 2013-14 | 2014-15 |
| Overall | 30% | 40% |
| Achievement | 7% | 11% |
| Progress | 48% | 72% |
| Climate | 20% | 27% |

Goals and Model

Carnell's Redesign proposal included three major components:

- Expeditionary Learning (EL)** is a national organization that supports schools to increase student engagement and achievement in three core areas: mastery of knowledge and skills, character building, and high-quality student work. EL's comprehensive model includes five key practices: 1) Real-World Curriculum, 2) Invigorating Instruction, 3) Assessing Student Learning, 4) Respectful Culture, and 5) Leadership. Carnell purchased the EL ELA curriculum for grades 3 through 5 and prioritized an inquiry and project-based learning approach across the school.
- Family & Community Engagement:** Carnell leadership and the Oxford Christian Community Circle Development Association (OCCDA) partnered at the outset of the plan to increase parental involvement and garner more support from other outside organizations.
- Talent Staffing & Recruitment:** The leadership team was committed to recruiting and supporting effective teachers who were invested in the expeditionary learning approach. In support of this goal, Carnell opted to require all teachers to reapply for their jobs before this current (2015-2016) school year. The reapplication process led to the turnover of more than half of the staff (approximately 70%), with the new staff recruited through a process that heavily emphasized the new project-based focus.

Executive Summary

Plan Implementation

- **The Expeditionary Learning (EL) curriculum was used for ELA in grades 3-5, though the quality and extent of implementation varied.** In addition, all grade levels engaged in experiential case studies that culminated in a Celebration of Learning.
- **Parents, community members and external organizations have been central to Carnell's Redesign, and the school has fostered an open and welcoming culture to encourage participation.** The school opened a Family Resource Center, which offered a popular ESL class for families, and parent engagement has increased across the school.
- **Ensuring staff fit has been a central component of Carnell's successful Redesign efforts.** The school replaced more than half of the staff this year, which helped to increase teacher buy-in to changes.

Key Takeaways

- **The school culture and staff mindset created a strong foundation for transformation.** The Carnell staff entered the Redesign process with a shared understanding that change was needed and imminent.
- **Recruitment of "best fit" teachers helped to increase adoption of Expeditionary Learning.** New teachers (including veteran teachers from other schools) specifically sought out Carnell because of the model, and these teachers have been more enthusiastic and successful compared to teachers placed at Carnell.
- **Distributive leadership increased buy-in and collaboration.** Teacher leaders helped inform the Redesign plan and worked with the principal to build support across the school community. The team still meets regularly to shape the vision of the school and craft professional development.
- **The transformation was limited by the lack of capacity and budget flexibility and relied heavily on external support and partners.** Carnell benefits from the support of EL, but needs to be able to allocate more resources to professional development and curriculum.

Implications

- **Carnell should continue to empower teachers through distributive leadership and offer consistent teacher development including expanding EL support to the lower grades.** The summer PD and learning walks should continue, and the leadership team should consider how to differentiate support for teachers who join the team after summer PD or are having more significant implementation challenges.
- **Transparency and a welcoming environment are essential for garnering needed support from external organizations and community members.** Other schools should ensure parents and community members play a meaningful role in the school improvement process.
- **The District should enable and support schools to recruit and hire teachers that are a good fit for their model.** School leadership must understand which personalities, skillsets and priorities align with specific instructional models. Allowing schools to find and select teachers with matching interests and skillsets is important for successful implementation of Redesign efforts.

Plan Implementation

Expeditionary Learning

During their design year in 2014-2015, Carnell leadership participated in several excellent school visits and ultimately decided to work with EL and purchase the curriculum and corresponding support because it aligned to the school's focus on inquiry, research, and reflection. The EL curriculum connects real-world issues and needs, by having students participate in academically rigorous, project-based learning case studies, fieldwork and service learning over the course of the year. Given budget limitations, Carnell only purchased the curriculum in ELA grades 3-5 for the first year of implementation. Carnell is adopting many aspects and values of the EL model across the school and may seek to enter the EL certification process in future years.

- **School culture and classroom management are improving through EL implementation.** A mid-year review from Expeditionary Learning applauded Carnell for its attention to implementation of the curriculum and a marked improvement in classroom management. While academic benchmark results are mixed, the reviewers found a positive change in school culture and community and a decrease in disciplinary issues.
- **All grade levels engaged in experiential case studies, which culminated in a Celebration of Learning.** Students in all grade levels conducted real-world case studies, which required them to engage in original research with primary source materials and deeply explore a topic to become experts. For example, 5th grade students partnered with Philabundance and 3rd grade students partnered with WEPAC to build a classroom library. Case studies culminated in a Celebration of Learning where students shared their work with the broader community. As one teacher shared, “this allows students to take a step into the real-world letting them have more of an impact. They look forward to it. They prepare their presentations. I just stood off to the side and they ran the show.”
- **All teachers in grades 3-5 implemented the EL ELA curriculum, though the quality and extent of implementation varied.** Across all 3-5 classrooms, teachers made use of EL strategies – such as posting and unpacking learning targets and assessing students through entrance and exit tickets – as part of their instruction. However, most teachers experienced a fairly steep learning curve adopting a more rigorous student-driven approach to learning, which required them to relinquish control of the classroom and engage students in deeper learning. As a result, most teachers struggled to pace throughout the curriculum and only completed three of the four modules this year.
- **An EL designer worked collaboratively with the Carnell instructional leadership team to support EL implementation.** Carnell leadership and teachers collaborated with an external EL designer to support implementation of the EL curriculum. With the designer's support, Carnell conducted a targeted multi-day professional development over the summer that focused on building team culture and transitioning to EL. During monthly site visits over the course of the year, the EL designer and leadership team used “learning walks”, which systematically gathered feedback on EL implementation through classroom observations. Carnell's approach to professional development was bottom-up, prioritizing teacher involvement over top-down administrative direction.

Family and Community Engagement

Parents, community members and external organizations have been central to Carnell's redesign, and the school has fostered an open and welcoming culture to encourage participation. Partners bring extra resources to the school,

including funding, volunteers to run programs, security for the school's entrance with organizations like safe corridor, and external experts to support the project-based learning curriculum.

- **Families were regularly welcomed into the school and overall parent engagement has increased.** Parents and community members were invited into the school to participate in "learning walks" to visit classrooms and observe lessons in action. In addition, parents and community members were actively involved in supporting Carnell's culture through organizing celebratory events for the staff and students at the school. As a result, parent engagement at Carnell has increased dramatically. For example, while very few parents have attended report-card conference night in the past, at least 500 parents -- more than 50% of the total parent population -- attended this year.
- **One key partnership brought additional resources and capacity to the school.** The Oxford Circle Christian Community Development Association (OCCDA), which specializes in engaging other partners to further support initiatives and growth for the school, played an integral role in the creation and implementation of the redesign plan. For example, this past year, the OCCDA was funded by the State Department of Education to provide free out-of-school programming to 100 Carnell students. The funds were used to obtain more than 40 chrome books for the out-of-school STEAM program.
- **Carnell benefited from a high-functioning School Advisory Council (SAC).** The SAC is a parent run advocacy group that meets monthly to discuss the needs of the school. While its formation occurred before Redesign, it expanded during the year and was integral in achieving many of Carnell's community outreach goals. More specifically, the SAC advised the administration, fostered new community partnerships, and led the successful launch of the Family Resource Center.
- **Community members regularly used the new Family Resource Center.** Carnell successfully partnered with OCCDA to open a new Family Resource Center to offer case management services, classes, workshops and volunteer opportunities for families to become more involved with the school. The center gets the most use during its English-Language learning classes two days per week, which have a consistent attendance of around 10 to 11 parents each session. Ultimately, the school aims to make it a one-stop shop to support families with their needs, but much of that work is just getting off the ground.

Talent Staffing and Recruitment

Ensuring staff fit has been a central component of Carnell's successful Redesign efforts.

The majority of teachers bought into the Redesign process. In the spring of 2015, all teachers were required to re-apply to the school prior to Redesign implementation. During this process, the principal emphasized the project-based learning approach to ensure optimal fit. Teachers whose values, priorities or skillsets did not align with the new direction of the school were either not invited back or chose not to re-apply. As a result of this process, close to 70% of the staff is new to the school this year. A few returning teachers noted that this process was "scary" and "uncomfortable" at times, as they lost many friends and colleagues. However, they all agreed that the process guaranteed investment in the new EL approach.

"I'm glad I'm here. I feel like if [as a teacher] you're not into the program, then students might not be into it. If you're not into it, they're not going to be into it."

- Carnell Veteran Teacher

Key Takeaways

✓ The school culture and staff mindset created a strong foundation for transformation.

The Carnell staff entered the Redesign process with a shared understanding that change was needed and imminent. Its reputation as a “school in crisis” helped ensure buy-in for more drastic changes. This shared understanding also made it easier to introduce the re-application process because teachers knew something needed to change.

According to both the principal and returning teachers, staff turnover became a necessary element of the transformation process by increasing the likelihood that change would be embraced. At the beginning of the year, many of the incoming teachers at Carnell arrived with an understanding and acceptance of the new educational model, which was critical to successful implementation in the first year.

“We weren’t meeting our targets. We knew we had to do something if we wanted to avoid being closed or turned around [through charter conversion]. The people that stayed are the ones who were adaptable but change is hard and not for everyone.”

- Carnell Veteran Teacher & Union Representative

✓ Recruitment of “best fit” teachers helped to increase adoption.

Carnell focused on ensuring all teachers were a strong fit for expeditionary learning. The application process heavily emphasized taking a holistic view to students’ learning and implementing a project-based approach to instruction in the classroom. Specifically, new teachers needed to be able to:

- Design tasks that asked students to apply, analyze, evaluate and create as a part of their work
- Use models of excellence, critique, and multiple drafts to support all students to produce work of exceptional quality
- Connect students to the world beyond school through meaningful fieldwork, expert collaborators, research and service learning

Some new teachers (including veteran teachers from other schools) specifically sought out Carnell because of this model, and these teachers have been more enthusiastic and successful in implementing the EL curriculum.

Conversely, a small handful of teachers were hired after the site selection period, and their placement was less focused on their “fit” to the school culture and new curriculum. As a result, the teachers assigned to the school were reluctant to embrace the model and had a more difficult time implementing the EL curriculum with fidelity.

✓ Distributive leadership increased buy-in and collaboration.

Since the onset of the Redesign process, Carnell invited teachers to be involved. Teacher leaders helped inform the Redesign plan and worked with the principal to communicate the rationale and necessity of that plan to the broader school community. This leadership team still meets regularly – usually weekly – and is responsible for continuing to shape the vision of the school and craft aligned professional development. The teacher leaders supported one another in their own development as coaches through regular interactions over the year. However, they have faced some challenges with scheduling their support of other teachers. The leaders had originally planned to meet once a week with grade level groups to share best practices, express concerns and receive/provide feedback. Unfortunately, these

meetings have been inconsistent due to the high coverage needs of staff given the substitute challenges that occurred in the district this year.

Beyond the leadership team, a core group of teachers who reapplied to stay at Carnell were also passionate about making changes. This core group played a significant role in ensuring school-wide buy-in to the Redesign implementation. While most of the staff was new to the school, almost everyone was actively bought into the Redesign model with the support of the more veteran teachers. In addition, new teachers were regularly added to the “teacher-leader roster”, and every grade team had a representative who reported to the curriculum advisor and the administration. As a result, the coaching model was extremely collaborative and called upon considerable leadership from the staff.

Carnell has emphasized distributive leadership as both a means of promoting collaboration amongst staff and a methodology for improving students’ learning. This leadership team has been critical in ensuring successful implementation of the EL curriculum, which has increased teachers’ ownership over their own improvement process and in turn, students’ ownership over their own learning. According to the principal, internal survey data shows that teacher, parent and student satisfaction have significantly increased this year.

“One of their work plan goals was to create a high-performing leadership team that included the coaches. That was their highest leverage move, to have that on the ground support and capacity within the building.”

- EL Education School Designer

✓ **The transformation at Carnell was limited by the lack of capacity and budget flexibility and relied heavily on external support and partners.**

During the first year of Redesign implementation, Carnell relied upon support from parents, community partnerships and outside organizations. In particular, Expeditionary Learning has provided critical ongoing training and support for implementing the new curriculum. However, Carnell has been unable to invest the desired resources in professional development and staff training because it could not secure budget flexibility to reallocate resources. Specifically, the principal requested to use funds allocated for a second counselor to purchase and expand curriculum and professional development, and the District did not approve this request.

In addition, other external organizations and individuals have supported project-based learning by serving as “experts” and providing lectures to students about various programs and issues. For example, a state trooper visited a classroom to discuss littering and the most common crimes that occur in the Oxford Circle Community, which was relevant to the case study the class was working on for Celebration of Learning.

Beyond the curriculum, the Family Resource Center (FRC) is perhaps the most prominent example of Carnell’s partnerships in action. The FRC was both organized by parents and outside organizations and has since served to further – and expand – these partnerships. In particular, the OCCDA offered support in the form of both funding and providing staff to run many of the programs offered by the center. While funding continues to be an issue for Carnell, the school has found ways to address some of their funding hurdles through a number of these partnerships. While Principal Pelzer values the support from organizational partners, he expressed concern about the future sustainability of some of Carnell’s programs without a more consistent source of revenue.

Implications

For Carnell

Carnell's goal is to implement a rigorous project-based learning model that emphasizes inquiry, research, collaboration, presentation, and reflection. Its continued progress toward this goal will rely on the following:

1. **Offer consistent teacher development and expand support to the lower grades.** While the majority of teachers are bought into the EL approach, many teachers are still experiencing a learning curve in fully implementing the EL curriculum. Carnell should sustain its current approach to summer PD and learning walks, but also consider how to differentiate support for teachers who join the team mid-year or are having more significant implementation challenges. Given the benefit of the learning walks, Carnell should also consider how to apply some of these practices to the lower grades where the EL curriculum is not available.
2. **Continue to empower teachers through distributive leadership.** While the EL Designer was critical to Carnell's successful implementation in the first year of Redesign, the school should bolster its efforts to build internal capacity. Carnell should continue to provide leadership opportunities to the community of teachers and invite new teachers to join their ranks. Additionally, leadership should ensure that teacher leaders have protected time to meet with each other, as well as other teachers.
3. **Maintain and expand external partnerships.** Carnell should continue to nurture its current partnerships, particularly with groups like the OCCDA, to support the school's programming. To ensure sustainability of programs in the future, Carnell should also leverage its success in the first year of Redesign implementation to identify new strategic partnerships.
4. **Secure resources to ensure sustainability.** In order to continue and expand the EL model, Carnell will need to identify additional resources for curriculum and professional development support.

For Other Schools

Carnell's experience in the first year of the implementation of its Redesign proposal contains several lessons for schools looking to make similar changes.

1. **Teacher leaders help ensure buy-in.** Carnell's principal was able to inspire some buy-in on his own, but Carnell heavily relied on teacher leaders to build systemic cultural acceptance of the changes. Inviting teachers to participate in Redesign and meeting regularly throughout the implementation process has significantly contributed to Carnell's success.
2. **Major changes require teacher fit.** School leadership must understand which personalities, skillsets and priorities align with specific instructional models. To this end, finding teachers with matching interests and skillsets is important for successful implementation of Redesign efforts.
3. **EL takes significant time and resources to implement.** Beyond the financial cost, the process of adopting a new student-centered curriculum takes significant time investment in the first year. Schools interested in adopting project-based learning, or similar models, should ensure there is sufficient time for ongoing professional development during the year and consider partnering with outside organizations to provide external support.
4. **Transparency and a welcoming environment are essential for garnering support from external organizations and community members.** Carnell invited parents and partner organizations on "learning walks" of the school, which established a unified sense of buy-in from community members beyond the

school. Other schools should ensure parents and community members play a meaningful role in the school improvement process.

5. **A successful Family Resource Center (FRC) requires a dedicated partner.** The FRC is made possible by Carnell's deep partnership with OCCEDA. Schools need an external partner to collaborate with staff and families to develop and execute on a shared vision for serving families in the school.

The School District of Philadelphia

Carnell's experience with EL points to ways that the School District of Philadelphia could provide additional support for schools looking to implement EL or a similar model:

1. **Enable and support schools to recruit and hire teachers that would be a good fit for their model.** Carnell relied upon its ability to replace more than half its staff to ensure teachers were bought in to the EL model. The District should give schools this staffing flexibility and provide additional recruitment support, such as offering schools the opportunity to promote their unique model to prospective teachers during the site selection process, so that schools can ensure that all teachers are opting into the model.
2. **Build schools' capacity to implement curricular changes.** Carnell greatly benefited from the support of an external EL designer throughout the implementation process. To ensure successful implementation, the District will need to consider how best to support schools engaging in curriculum transformation. This could be achieved by better aligning existing District personnel to support school needs, hiring additional district-support staff to oversee project-based schools, and/or supporting schools to identify external support for Redesign implementation.
3. **Help address coverage issues in schools.** The District's lack of substitute coverage limited the time teachers and teacher leaders had to meet and collaborate at Carnell. Given the significant investment in Redesign schools, the District should consider how it could ensure that these issues do not stand in the way of transformation by prioritizing their staffing needs.
4. **Increase budget flexibility.** In order to fully implement a new model, schools need the ability to allocate resources to meet the needs of staff and students. Carnell