

Ideas *for* NYC Principals

*A Step-by-Step Approach to Distributed Leadership at
Creston Academy for Responsibility and Excellence,
2012–15*

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Executive Summary

Background: A Three-Year Study of the Citywide Instructional Expectations. From 2012 to 2015, Eskolta School Research and Design (Eskolta) worked with the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) to develop case studies to explore how the Citywide Instructional Expectations (CIE) impact school leaders, teaching and learning, and, ultimately, student achievement in a set of New York City schools.

This publication is designed to help principals reflect on their own approach to meeting district-level expectations in their schools through an exploration of the work of Creston Academy for

Responsibility and Excellence. Creston Academy is a middle school serving approximately 500 students in the Bronx. Nearly all students at the school (98 percent) are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Students classified as English Language Learners make up approximately one-third of the students, and one-fifth of students receive special-education services. Eskolta’s research suggests that the school’s approach to employing a model of distributed leadership that empowers educators to support their colleagues is key to its ability to meet the City’s expectations.

Key Distributed Leadership Practices at Creston Academy. Three practices emerge at Creston Academy as central to its success in distributed leadership. First, the school leadership sets a tone for frequent, transparent feedback through regular observations and debriefs with teachers. Second, teacher leaders develop trusting relationships with colleagues through their own regularly scheduled observations and informal support. Third, extensive use of modeling by teachers for other teachers enables sharing and building upon strong practice across the school.

A Step-by-Step Guide to Distributed Leadership at Creston Academy. While the approach at Creston Academy will not fit every school, six steps taken at Creston appear to be critical to its success. First, the school identified prospective teacher leaders who were open to learning and respected by faculty. The principal then introduced these teacher leaders by explicitly emphasizing that they were learners along with their colleagues. Once the “teacher leader” role was introduced, the principal designated demonstration classrooms and time in the schedule for visitation. Then, the principal scheduled regular meetings between teacher leaders and other teachers that focused on classroom practice. In order to ensure that support from teacher leaders was built upon trust, and not evaluative accountability, teacher leaders carefully aligned visits and debriefs to school and district expectations. Finally, the principal connected with teacher leaders in a way that maintained confidentiality and support.

The guide at the end of this study delves further into these steps to help other New York City principals consider their own approaches to distributed leadership. School leaders can use the guiding questions below as they consider how the steps relate to their own experience and inform their planning:

- How might you adapt these steps to meet your school’s needs?
- What structures do you already have in place at your school that can enable distribution of leadership to reach goals?
- In what ways does your school’s existing culture enable or constrain true distributed leadership?

Background: A Three-Year Study of Citywide Instructional Expectations

The CIE consist of policy recommendations released by the NYCDOE for schools to support students' academic and social-emotional growth and college and career readiness. Over the years of this study, the CIE focused in large part on introducing the Common Core Learning Standards and the use of the Danielson *Framework for Teaching*. The challenge of translating district-level expectations into school-level change, however, is not an easy one and was achieved with varying degrees of efficacy at schools studied.

From 2012 to 2015, Eskolta conducted interviews and focus groups with staff at Creston Academy, documenting as the school's work evolved through three rounds of CIE. During this time, the school strengthened its practices to outperform peer schools in a number of areas and achieved greater proficiency in school quality measures, highlighted by the NYCDOE. This research suggests that the school was able to meet the city's stated expectations consistently, not by focusing explicitly on these expectations, but by creating structures that helped the school to concentrate on the consistent substance and purpose underlying them. **In particular, the school's approach to employing a model of distributed leadership that empowered educators to support their colleagues was key to its ability to meet the City's expectations.**

Evidence of the strong collaborative environment and effective leadership at Creston Academy is reflected throughout the school. In the school's 2013–14 New York City school survey results, 97 percent of teachers reported that they spent time on teams working to improve instructional practice. Additionally, 95 percent of teachers reported that their principal communicated a clear vision for their school.

Ideas for NYC Principals: A Step-by-Step Approach to Distributed Leadership at Creston Academy for Responsibility and Excellence, 2012–15 provides an overview of the school's practice in the context of the CIE and connects this approach to a tool based on the school's work. It is intended for other principals to consider how they can engage in distributed leadership with their staff.

Three Key Distributed Leadership Practices at Creston Academy: Frequent Feedback, Peer Support, and Leadership through Modeling

The two walls of the main hallway at Creston Academy tell the story at the heart of its identity. On the left wall, a bulletin board displays student work and rubrics that a teacher has annotated with an individualized commendation and recommendation for each student. On the right wall, a bulletin board reads, “Teacher Information Center.” On this board, a picture of students during small-group instruction is accompanied by a description of how this practice works in one classroom. A schedule of lessons in the school’s designated demonstration classrooms is posted alongside a photograph of the school’s teacher leaders and a write-up describing the school’s intervisitation process. Differentiation and distributed leadership are seen not only on the hallway walls but throughout the three-year study of Creston Academy and its work employing the New York City Citywide Instructional Expectations (CIE).

When Pamela Edwards, principal of Creston, heard about the first round of the CIE in 2011, she anticipated that the school would be handling “so much that was new—from the Common Core ...to grants to Danielson [Framework] to the MOSLs [Measures of Student Learning]” that it would be foolish to attempt to handle it alone. She recalls recognizing that if she could draw on her own teachers to help lead that work, it would result in greater individualized support and staff engagement and would develop the expectations into experiences that, as she would later put it, “help everybody to learn.”

With this in mind, in 2011–12 Principal Edwards applied for her school to be part of the Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF), a grant that enabled her to establish a group of five teacher leaders whom she designated responsible for coaching and mentoring their peers, leading demonstration lessons for their peers to observe, and guiding teacher teams as they worked to implement the Common Core. By turning to teacher leaders, Edwards made it easier for her staff to integrate Common Core standards and practices suggested by the Danielson *Framework for Teaching*, two elements at the core of the CIE. “When teachers are helping other teachers, it’s a little bit of a different feeling than when an administrator is working with a teacher,” Ms. Edwards would later reflect. “There’s a little more trust there.”

Indeed, a visitor to Creston Academy could feel the collaborative culture. Teachers received instructional support from school leaders, were paired with teacher leaders, and had access to demonstration classrooms. “Our name should be collaboration,” one teacher suggested, echoing the principal’s point. “There’s always someone to team up with and share ideas.”

“When teachers are helping other teachers, it’s a little bit of a different feeling than when an administrator is working with a teacher. There’s a little more trust there.”

Principal Pamela Edwards

Leadership Sets the Tone for Frequent Feedback

Even before the release of the Citywide Instructional Expectations in 2011, Ms. Edwards had established a daily routine for providing teachers direct support. By visiting two teachers a day, she ensured that she saw each faculty member in the classroom at least once a month. “My role is to help teachers, and for me that means observing them and offering **frequent feedback**,” she reflected. “I always meet with teachers for one full period after I observe their class, even for the informal ones. It’s during these meetings that we discuss what went well, what didn’t, what’s going on with the students. And then we talk about data and what that’s indicating. These meetings usually help me decide what else needs to happen, if anything, to further support this teacher.”

After a typical observation, Ms. Edwards and the teacher collaboratively identify one aspect of practice that they can focus on improving, targeting support to make it manageable. As she developed her team of teacher leaders, Ms. Edwards also looked to them to maintain this focus. She met with them regularly to discuss the strengths and needs of the faculty as well as the practices the teacher leaders were addressing during individual support and professional development.

“

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Principal Pamela Edwards

Teachers Find Support through Colleagues They Trust

As these expectations expanded in 2012–2013, the message was conveyed to teachers at Creston Academy that they always had the option to request coaching from a teacher leader or ask to participate in one-on-one meetings to further support their efforts to meet the expectations.



Peer Support Matters

Teachers cited peer support as making them more likely to integrate practices because they were suggested by others who were “in the trenches,” teaching alongside them, and often teaching the same students.

One teacher, interviewed in 2012, requested coaching to learn more about establishing clear routines in her classroom to set the foundation for effective small-group instruction. “As a first-year teacher, I looked to someone with experience who’s grounded in best practices and all the things we do here, especially differentiation,” the teacher explained. Indeed, teachers cited this **peer support** as making them more likely to integrate practices because these practices were suggested by others who were “in the trenches,” teaching alongside them and often teaching the same students.

In debriefing one such intervisitation during the 2012–13 school year, a teacher leader and teacher pair decided to focus on improving questioning and discussion techniques,

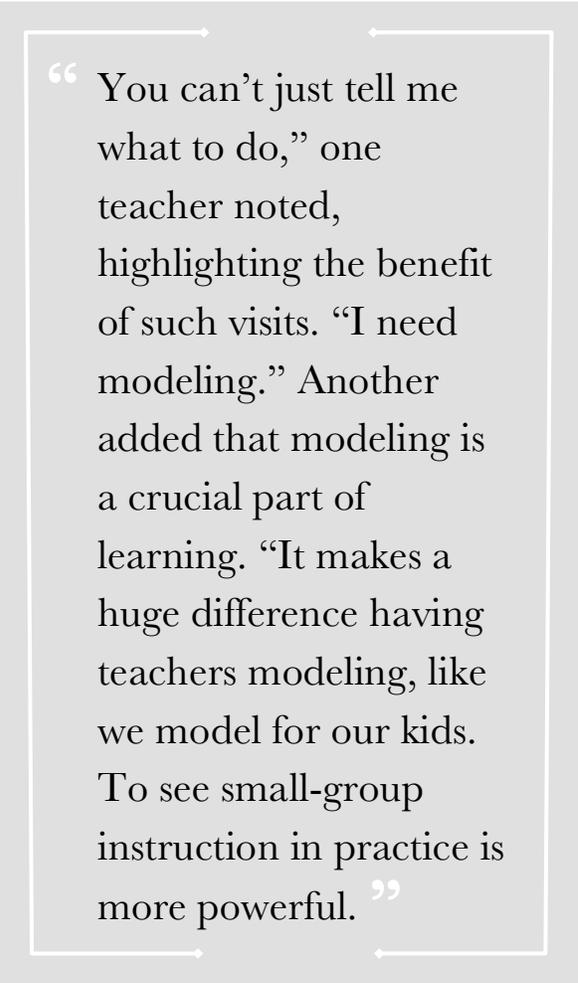
a goal that they tied directly to component 3b in the Danielson *Framework for Teaching*. They collaboratively decided to use accountable talk sentence starters based on *Dr. Norman Webb's Depth of Knowledge*, a concept tied to the Common Core. They posted these sentence starters on each student's desk, and the teacher began to model using them in class. With each intervisitation, the teacher later noted that students integrated more accountable talk and soon began to internalize the sentence starters.

Teachers Find Models in the Classroom Next Door

Through the role of teacher leaders at the school, visits to demonstration classrooms became a routine part of the experience at Creston Academy. Teachers could visit demonstration classrooms on their own and were sometimes encouraged to do so by the principal. "You can't just tell me what to do," one teacher noted, highlighting the benefit of such visits. "I need **modeling**." Another added, "It makes a huge difference having teachers modeling, like we model for our kids. To see small-group instruction in practice is more powerful."

One such visit in the 2012–13 year began about halfway through a double period when a group of teachers filtered into a teacher leader's classroom. She had just finished the second brief mini-lesson of the day, and the students were now working in groups of five to six. As the classroom hummed with quiet activity, the visiting teachers took low-inference notes. Using handouts prepared by the teacher leaders, they documented teacher actions in one column and student actions in the other. About ten minutes before class ended, the teacher leader asked her students to share, and several described what they had learned. She distributed exit slips that she had differentiated based on the individual groups' assignments. The visiting teachers slipped out of the room to debrief and identify insights and learnings.

Three years of studying Creston Academy brought to light ways in which the comprehensive support of distributed leadership helps teachers become more prepared, better align their instruction to the Danielson *Framework for Teaching*, and adapt to curricular changes. "You make a decision about how to roll something out, and you have a team to do it," is how Ms. Edwards put it. "What makes a good school is teamwork," she noted, adding her ongoing aspiration: "We can hold ourselves even more accountable."



“ You can't just tell me what to do,” one teacher noted, highlighting the benefit of such visits. “I need modeling.” Another added that modeling is a crucial part of learning. “It makes a huge difference having teachers modeling, like we model for our kids. To see small-group instruction in practice is more powerful. ”

Step-by-Step Guide to Distributed Leadership at Creston Academy

Through a series of studies of Creston Academy for Responsibility and Excellence from 2012 to 2015, it became evident that the school was able to meet New York City’s Citywide Instructional Expectations (CIE) consistently, not by focusing explicitly on these expectations, but by creating the structures that helped the school to concentrate on the consistent substance and purpose underlying them. In particular, the school’s approach to employing a model of distributed leadership that empowers educators appeared to be key to its ability to meet the CIE. The steps on the pages that follow are based on the work of Creston Academy and are designed to help other principals explore how they employ teacher leadership to meet expectations. School leaders can use the guiding questions below as they consider how the steps relate to their own experience and inform future planning.

Guiding Questions for Reading

- How might you adapt these steps to meet your school’s needs?
- What structures do you already have in place at your school that can enable distribution of leadership to reach goals?
- In what ways does your school’s existing culture enable and constrain true distributed leadership?

STEPS TO DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP AT CRESTON ACADEMY

1. **Identify** prospective teacher leaders who are open to learning and respected by faculty.
2. **Introduce** teacher leaders by emphasizing that they are learners.
3. **Designate** demonstration classrooms and time in the schedule for visitation.
4. **Schedule** regular meetings between teacher leaders and teachers, with a focus on classroom practice.
5. **Align** visits and debriefs to school and district expectations in a supportive way.
6. **Connect** teacher leaders with the principal in a way that maintains confidentiality and support.



I. Identify teacher leaders who are open to learning and respected by faculty.

The principal at Creston Academy began by identifying teacher leaders who exhibited the following three traits: a mindset of continual improvement, respect of staff, and strong teaching practice. By 2014–2015, Ms. Edwards had identified eight teacher leaders to support about 25 colleagues, a ratio of three teachers for each teacher leader.

She had been able to procure funds and support for this initial work through participation in the Teacher Effectiveness Pilot and the Teacher Incentive Fund, NYCDOE programs that supported development of teacher leaders. But such additional funding is not always available. Teacher leaders at the school suggest that if they had less release time available, supporting two colleagues (rather than three) would have been more appropriate.



2. Introduce teacher leaders by emphasizing that they are learners.

Ms. Edwards emphasizes that it was critical that other teachers “really feel the teacher leaders are not evaluators and consider them in a more collegial sense.” As one teacher leader notes, “You have to know [your practice], while also constantly making it clear that you have so much to learn, too.”

She helped them access professional development to gain familiarity with the Danielson *Framework for Teaching* and Common Core learning standards.

Indeed, she thus normalized the idea that everyone needs support by acknowledging that teacher leaders also were learning and receiving support to improve their practice.



3. Designate demonstration classrooms and time in the schedule for visitation.

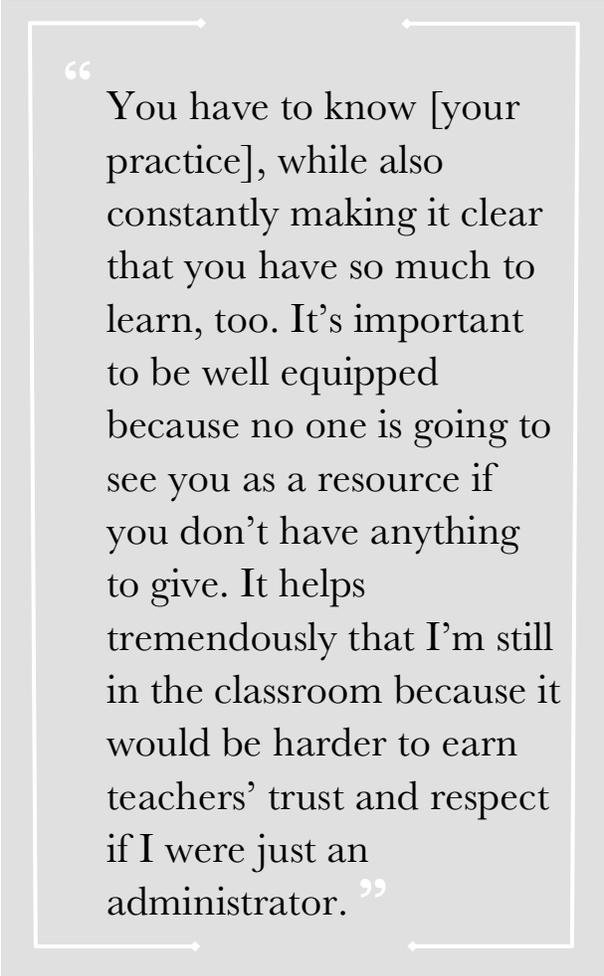
Once a group of teacher leaders was identified at Creston Academy, it was important to have routine opportunities for them to meet with designated teachers and with each other. These meetings provided regular time for teachers to receive support with day-to-day challenges and for leaders to think and plan together.

Two actions taken by Ms. Edwards to prioritize such meetings are noteworthy. First, she secured funding for additional release time for teacher leaders to plan, conduct, and debrief intervisitations with colleagues. Bringing such resources into the school was central to building these leadership roles. At the time, she was able to do this by applying to pilot programs offered by the NYCDOE. These pilot programs were later replaced by Model and Peer Collaborative Teacher roles in the City’s contract with the teacher union. Second, with a role in place at her school for teacher leadership, she then publicly identified demonstration classrooms. To do this, she highlighted specific classrooms where she had observed strong teaching practice in relation to specific components of the Danielson *Framework for Teaching*.



4. Schedule regular meetings between teacher leaders and teachers, with a focus on classroom practice.

With time to meet and identified teacher leaders and demonstration classrooms in place, Ms. Edwards matched three teachers to each teacher leader and worked with them to establish a monthly schedule of intervisitations. Each teacher leader visited a new teacher roughly once a week and a more experienced teacher roughly once a month. In addition, she set aside a period for the



“ You have to know [your practice], while also constantly making it clear that you have so much to learn, too. It’s important to be well equipped because no one is going to see you as a resource if you don’t have anything to give. It helps tremendously that I’m still in the classroom because it would be harder to earn teachers’ trust and respect if I were just an administrator. ”

teacher leader and teacher to debrief as soon after the visit as possible. Alongside these responsibilities, she scheduled her teacher leaders to be facilitators for grade-team meetings that focused on instructional support and lesson planning. In general, teacher leaders at Creston Academy were scheduled for the following meetings:

Teacher Leadership Activity at Creston Academy	Typical Frequency
Teacher Leaders meet to plan together	Once a week
Teacher Leader facilitates Instructional Support meeting with colleagues	Once a week
Teacher Leader visits new teachers' classrooms and debriefs	Once a week
Teacher Leader visits more experienced teachers' classrooms and debriefs	Once a month
Teacher Leaders meet with principal to debrief, reflect, and plan	Twice a month

5. Structure classroom visits and debriefs to align to school and district expectations in a supportive way.

The language and framework that teachers use for discussing instruction can help them clarify their own understanding of good teaching practice. While it would have been heavy-handed for the principal to impose such a framework on her teaching staff, Ms. Edwards helped her teacher leaders easily access tools using the language of the Danielson *Framework* to support discussions, thereby helping them readily engage with the language of the CIE. Teacher leaders at Creston Academy adapted tools provided through their involvement in the Teacher Incentive Fund to ground their intervisitations in the Danielson *Framework* and focus specifically on the components highlighted in the CIE.

During classroom visits, a template (see Figure 1, next page) helped teacher leaders take low-inference notes in which they carefully described exactly what they saw the teacher and students doing, capturing as much detail as they could. The template specifically called out three teaching skills that were important to the teachers at Creston Academy and that also were highlighted in the CIE—fostering discussion, engaging students, and assessing to provide feedback. One teacher leader noted, “All of our lessons focus on Danielson, so all of our follow-up meetings also focus on Danielson. It’s all about the domain, and then each smaller component of each domain. When we use forms to guide our conversations, we always have a copy of Danielson on hand to refer to.”

When debriefing, teacher leaders and teachers collaboratively reviewed the notes that corresponded with Danielson domains. As they did this, they engaged in a few common practices:

- **Use a protocol to analyze teaching practices and reflect on how to improve.** By using Danielson as a lens to view their own and their peers’ practices, teachers deepened their understanding of strong teaching approaches as they continually aligned their practice to the CIE.
- **Define clear next steps.** The pair focused on a specific component of Danielson based on what they had observed. This was guided by focused discussions on identifying strengths and sharing ideas.
- **Provide confidential feedback about how they are meeting expectations.** While general feedback was documented in writing, more specific, pointed feedback was shared in conversations only. In this way, teachers were reminded that their support from their teacher leader was confidential and not evaluative.

Figure 1: Template for Low-Inference Note-Taking Focusing on Three Danielson Components from the CIE.

Danielson Domain	Low-Inference Description of Teacher and Student Actions	
	Teacher	Student
3b. Using Questioning and Discussion Techniques		
3c. Engaging Students in Learning		
3d. Providing Feedback to Students		
Debrief Notes		
Next Steps		



6. Connect teacher leaders with the principal in a way that maintains confidentiality and support.

In semi-weekly meetings, the principal and teacher leaders discussed progress to ensure that everyone was supported in meeting the CIE. In these meetings, teacher leaders were never asked to report on individual teachers, a practice designed to ensure discussions remained confidential. Instead, the principal was able to gather general updates on teachers' progress and common challenges voiced by teacher leaders. The principal and teacher leaders were then able to collaboratively reflect on teachers' needs and use these to plan focused areas for support and professional development.

Ms. Edwards describes the ongoing role she plays in distributed leadership: "If the teacher is not supported, the [teacher leader] is not doing her job, and I am not doing my job in supporting the [teacher leader]. It's all about having that extra layer of support built in." By building that extra layer of support with a structured schedule and process for intervisitations, as well as intervening layers that carefully maintain confidentiality, Principal Edwards has developed an approach for staff to meet expectations in a way that is supportive to them and their practice as educators.