

O'Hare Middle School: What to Do in January?

This case is a fictional case grounded in reality. While Camilla Adriane and O'Hare are fictional, they are grounded in real people and places. The activities, voices, and patterns described are drawn from real and multiple settings.

December 13, 2017 (6:27 p.m.)

Dazed and exhausted, Camilla Adriane sat at her desk. Other than the principal's office, O'Hare Middle School was quiet and dark. Camilla could not quite muster the energy to go home like her faculty and staff had hours earlier.

Today, Camilla and her Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) hosted their first instructional rounds visit. While Camilla had been to Harvard to receive training first-hand and while she had participated in rounds in both Boston and in her home district, it took more out of her than she had anticipated.

Teachers from O'Hare, along with central office curriculum leaders, department heads, and executive directors, participated in the rounds process, visiting numerous classrooms, and engaging in a rather intense debrief of the evidence. While she was not entirely shocked to listen to the findings, it was sometimes painful to hear those conclusions coming from her school colleagues and district leaders.

Across from her desk on the far wall, Camilla looked at the flipchart paper that summarized key patterns and trends from the classroom visits:

- Universal adherence to posting of a learning target and the connected standards in every classroom
- Compliant and generally well-behaved students
- Wide variation in the intellectual rigor of academic tasks, with some tasks poorly aligned with the posted learning target
- Relatively weak intellectual engagement of students, with many students unmotivated and unchallenged within the classroom to think
- Some classrooms with disproportionate time disciplining the behavior of males of color, often in ways that embarrassed the children
- While learning targets were clearly posted, many students could not articulate in their words what they were learning and why

Now, as she prepares to send the teachers and students home for winter break, Camilla wonders what she needs to do to improve student learning, achievement, and outcomes.

Camilla Adriane and O'Hare Middle School

Camilla Adriane is in her third year as principal of O'Hare Middle School, a school in the urban core of Webster Public Schools. Camilla has been an educator for a dozen years, serving as a counselor at the middle and high school levels for ten years and an assistant principal in an elementary school for the other two. When tapped to take over O'Hare, she was widely regarded as a rising star in the district. "It was only a matter of time before she was running her own school," one of her principals reflected.



O'Hare Middle School serves approximately 387 students in grades 6, 7 and 8. Just over 90% of the student body is eligible for free lunch. 67% of the students are African-American, 15 % are Hispanic, and 3 percent of the students categorize themselves as multi-racial.

O'Hare has 24.5 full-time equivalent teachers. The teaching staff is relatively white, young, and female. 80% of the teachers were Caucasian, 75% were female, and 60% were within their first five years of teaching. From the beginning, Camilla generally liked her staff. They were "eager and earnest" and "seemed to deeply care about the students."

2015 - 2016

At the time, Camilla felt she had a relatively good year. Her first year (2015-2016) was stimulating and exhausting, with almost every day filled with challenges she had never experienced or addressed as an administrator. As she once shared with a colleague, "I made tons of errors that year, but none big enough to make anyone at central office or in the community irate. I didn't sleep. I seemed to only eat Ben & Jerry's and McDonald's. I guess I survived on adrenaline, carbs, and naiveté."

Summer 2016 & 2016 - 2017

But then results from year one came back over the summer. O'Hare's scores on the state assessment, like many schools in Webster, were flat. She and her teachers had hoped for some improvement because "we had worked so hard . . . so earnestly." When administrators reported back in August, they learned that performance across the district was a bit disappointing, and the central office was asking all schools to "double down on standards-based instruction" by implementing three big areas of focus: knowledge of standards, assessment literacy, and backwards mapping. In the administrative retreat that August, the assistant superintendent of teaching and learning explained the new focus plainly:

We just don't have solid enough instruction occurring often enough and in enough classrooms. We need to go back to the basics of intentional, standards-based instruction. Our teachers need to deeply know what they are trying to teach, use data to drive instructional decisions, and backwards map units, lessons and academic tasks that are aligned to the standards and informed by the current performance levels of students. If we don't have that foundation, nothing else will matter.

To Camilla Adriane, the new areas of focus made intuitive sense. "Who could argue with solid instructional practice." Yet the new areas of focus seemed to put into question all of her planning from the spring and over the summer. "Back that previous spring, my supervisor told me to plan out all of the professional development hours for 2016-2017, aligning professional learning to my improvement plan. I had worked with my ILT to sketch out a PLC structure that would support teachers in collaborating and looking at data. All of that seemed to be called into question, and teachers were reporting back in just a handful of days."

Throughout that August 2016 retreat and in the monthly administrator professional development sessions that school year, central office provided training on the three priorities. "Those sessions were kind of useful. I really needed the time with my colleagues. I was depressed and overwhelmed, and I needed the collegiality of others. This is a lonely job." Content-wise, Camilla struggled. "They clearly had planned those sessions—it seemed like lots of energy went into that PD. Many were engaging and thought-provoking. They provided primers on each of the priority areas, but I was often at a loss for what to do tomorrow. Did they expect me to be an expert on this stuff and know exactly how to translate it back for my teachers?"



Camilla tried to reinforce the three priorities in faculty meetings, weekly letters to the faculty, and in formal observations. Faculty meetings were short and infrequent, but those were the only times when she had all of the teachers and could provide a singular message in person. Often, she drew a specific exercise or activity from the principal PD sessions. As she explained, “I didn’t have the luxury of 3 hours at a time to address these issues, so I would just replicate a small part of what we did in administrator PD.”

Each Friday she wrote a short, up-lifting note to the faculty. It typically had a straightforward structure. It began with a short poem. It then had a paragraph with reflections on the week. “This is where I might comment on a discipline challenge or share a suggestion about better meeting the socio-emotional needs of our children.” The note usually ended with an itemized list of upcoming matters such as sporting events, choral concerts, or upcoming assessments. Camilla sometimes dedicated time to write about the three priorities. By December of 2016, she had taken to list the three priorities at the top of the email note, right next to the school’s letterhead.

Evaluations were the primary mechanism for giving teachers feedback on their practice. Calibrated by Cambridge Associates, Camilla felt she could give a fair assessment of teacher practice using the Danielson Framework. However, she also felt awkward in the debriefs. “Let’s be honest, all of my teachers have taught more than me. I’m now supposed to be the expert and judge their teaching. I’m better at rating them than at telling them specifically how to improve.”

Camilla also hoped that PLCs might advance the work of the district priorities. While she didn’t regularly visit the professional learning communities, she and her ILT discussed PLCs, and teacher leaders were supposed to be sharing what they were learning in their own professional development on standards-based instruction.

In the spring of 2017, a tragedy hit the O’Hare community. A beloved and active mom of a 7th grader suddenly died. The mom, a regular volunteer at the school, was well-recognized and known by almost all teachers. Of course, the child and her entire family were devastated. What surprised Camilla was the impact on other children. Many children also knew the mom, and the new experience of such a sudden loss hit hard. “I felt like we lost a month of focus on academics. Don’t get me wrong. Teachers were still teaching. They were troupers. We just didn’t talk a lot about the state assessments or about the three district priorities. By the time we regained our footing, it was almost time for the state assessments.”

Summer 2017

Again, the state assessments were disappointing. While some of her colleague’s schools saw impressive jumps in Math and ELA, O’Hare had made little progress. In fact, it slid backward in math. Though overall performance across the state was modest at best, it did not tamp down the sense of urgency and frustration. O’Hare was a school in need of improvement, and it just wasn’t budging. Moreover, performance of African-American males in grades 7 and 8 had dropped significantly (more than in any other middle school in the district), and Camilla didn’t have a clear explanation for why. Though she didn’t admit it to anyone, she began to worry whether she had what it took to turn the school around.

August 2017

In the August 2017 administrative retreat, the district leaders were clear. They were keeping their focus on the “big three”. As the assistant superintendent explained, “We just started this work; we have lots more work to do, and we need to maintain our focus on providing students a solid foundation of



standards-based instruction. We just need to help our teachers get much better and much more intentional about it.”

In September, Camilla’s supervisor suggested she gather systematic feedback from her teachers. As a relatively novice principal, this would be a great way to hear voices of teachers, create a feedback loop, and assess the professional culture. Camilla did just that, adopting an off-the-Internet instructional leadership tool and importing it into Survey Monkey. The survey enabled teachers to anonymously rate Camilla’s performance on a series of leadership competencies and provide more in-depth feedback in open-ended prompts (See Exhibit 1).

“Well, that was a kick in the teeth! I’m still getting over those results. Perhaps I should have waited till later in the year, after the smoke was clearing. It just seemed like they thought I was doing a horrible job. I know there are ways I could improve, but I’m not sure I’m that bad.”

After the results came in, Camilla tried to lean more heavily on the Instructional Leadership Team. In her first October ILT meeting, she designed an agenda to get voices out on the table. “Basically, I wanted to have their unfiltered assessments and suggestions.” Teacher leaders gave her an earful, though it didn’t feel like an attack.

Some teachers on the ILT noted how overwhelmed the staff felt:

“We are trying to do too much, too fast.”

“Teachers want to get good at something before being asked to do something else.”

“The district keeps raising the bar on what I am supposed to cover, but the students still keep coming to us from the elementary schools too far behind.”

Others provided another analysis.

“I think we don’t really know what this looks like. We are told to know the standards, use data, and backwards map. All of those words are familiar. Some of us think we are doing it. But I’m not sure we know what it looks like to do it well.”

“I think we need more focus and help. Can we get help from the curriculum team? Can we visit other schools?”

And at least one member of the ILT felt like there was not much improvement to do.

“We have great teachers who work really hard. We also have students who come from trauma and poverty. They are experiencing so much devastation outside of school. We are taking care of these children and family. We are doing what is right by them.”

Meaning-Making and Transfer

At the same time that Camilla was feeling heat from within O’Hare, she also felt the pressure from the central office. In the fall administrator professional learning, the intensity seemed to get ratcheted up. Though they were told the district would remain squarely focused on the three priorities for the foreseeable future, the facilitators were now covering new content. In addition to the “big three,” schools were supposed to ensure that students were provided opportunities in their academic tasks to construct meaning and to transfer learning to new contexts. “Perhaps my teachers are right; we need time to get better at something before layering on more work.”



With pressure high and strategies thin, Camilla allowed two members of her ILT to organize an instructional rounds visit. The two teachers, who had also gone to Harvard for training, wanted the visit to include only teachers. Camilla agreed to having a rounds visit, but with one amendment--they needed to include a handful of central office leaders. "Having a balance of outside and inside perspectives can only help us," Camilla thought.

December 13, 2017

At the beginning of the rounds visit, the two teachers who spearheaded the visit planning presented a problem of practice:

We are struggling to raise the intellectual challenge of students in classrooms with such a range of learner performance.

Visitors and teachers split up and visited, collectively, almost all classrooms, carefully following the Harvard-provided process and protocols. Camilla began to shut down during the debrief. She didn't say much, but she tried to listen carefully. That said, she was overwhelmed by how her teachers and central office described *her* school. "It was sobering. At some point I had an out-of-body experience, and I felt like Charlie Brown listening to adults --"Bwa, bwaaaa, bwaa, bwaaaaaaa."

Now, with the visit over and all the faculty at home, she sat in her office trying to think ahead. With students and faculty about to go home for the winter break, she wanted to know what to do next. How should she kick off the rest of the year in January? What tone did she want to set? What would her leadership moves be? She only had a limited amount of time to reset and get ready for the state assessments.

Discussion Prompts

1. What are the improvement challenges O'Hare is facing?
2. How would you rate Camilla's leadership to date?
3. What specific leadership moves would you make after December 13?

Exhibit 1: Results from the September 2017 Survey

	Almost Always	Frequently	Sometimes	Seldom	Almost Never
Communicates the school's academic goals to people at school	11	26	35	22	6
Refers to the school's academic goals in informal settings with teachers	10	28	32	25	5
Uses school's academic goals when making curricular decisions with teachers	8	25	38	20	9
Conducts informal observations in classrooms on a regular basis (informal are unscheduled, last at least five minutes, and may or may not involve written feedback)	0	7	20	45	28
Ensures that the classroom objectives of teachers are consistent with the stated goals of the school?	9	24	37	21	9
Evaluates teachers on academic objectives directly related to those of the school	5	28	27	20	20
Provides specific, timely and actionable feedback on teaching	10	20	20	26	24
Creates a positive culture in school	45	20	16	11	8
Provides teachers with in-service activities consistent with school's academic goals	17	14	20	14	15
Sets aside time at faculty meetings for teachers to share ideas on instruction or information from new in-service activities	26	22	20	12	20



What are the biggest challenges that you face as a teacher? (*representative statements*)

- “Our students just are not motivated enough. I just can’t keep them engaged in my lessons.”
- “The district is asking us to do way too much stuff. Every time we turn around there is another initiative.”
- “I do not have enough time to plan. I need more time to plan lessons, analyze data, and reach out to parents. I just can’t do it all.”
- “I need more opportunities to grow as a teacher. Find us money so we can go to conferences like we used to. I miss going to ASCD.”
- “Discipline.”
- “Parents don’t care enough. Our kids do not come prepared to learn.”
- “Most of my students are great, but I have a handful of students with lots of emotional needs. I spend all my energy managing and directing them. I’m not equipped with tools to help them.”
- “I’m not sure what is most important. We have our goals and the district has theirs.”