

Content-Focused, Expert-Led Collaboration at Achievement First

How Achievement First's teaching teams ignite the engine of stronger instruction and professional learning

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INTRODUCTION

In May 2013, the first year of testing aligned to new Common Core State Standards came to a close in New York. Doug McCurry, the co-CEO of the charter management organization Achievement First, prepared to speak to the network's staff and teachers. He told them, "I'm anticipating that when the test results come out, Achievement First students (like students throughout the state) will have some pretty suboptimal results." Suboptimal results had not been the norm at Achievement First. With 32 schools located across Brooklyn; Providence, Rhode Island; New Haven and Hartford, Connecticut, the network was well known for its success in narrowing achievement gaps: 85 percent of its students qualify for free and reduced lunch (FRL) and historically outperformed peers in their host districts by 20 to 30 percentage points. Achievement First students were also rapidly closing achievement gaps relative to their wealthy neighboring districts, including Greenwich, Westport, and Madison in Connecticut, and Rye, New York.

The 2013 assessment results were indeed disappointing: proficiency rates in math for students in Achievement First's New York schools dropped from 88 percent to 46 percent. Key strategies that had worked so well for the first several years of Achievement First's growth—including a longer student and teacher day, more professional learning time for teachers, and a strong focus on professional collaboration—were no longer sufficient in their current form to help students achieve under the new, more rigorous standards.

"The Common Core is giving us the gift of clarity (here's where our kids need to be) and brutal feedback (here's where our kids are)," Doug McCurry wrote to his team. In response, Achievement First leaders redesigned the network's existing professional learning structures to better support its teachers in facing this new challenge. At the heart of this new support was a vision for collaborative time: teachers should be able to work together, with the support of experts, to focus on how to deliver each day's lesson to students in a way that would challenge and inspire them to meet college- and career-ready standards.

In this case study, we will explore how Achievement First redesigned teacher collaboration as part of a broader shift to what we call “Connected Professional Learning.” As we describe in our white paper, [“Igniting the Learning Engine: How School Systems Accelerate Teacher Effectiveness and Student Growth Through Connected Professional Learning,”](#) professional learning should be connected to the work teachers do every day. Each individual element—curriculum, collaboration, and feedback—integrates with one another as well as with the system’s overall theory of action for how teachers improve and ultimately how students learn. Network leaders in Achievement First have done just that, beginning with a vision for what their students and teachers need to be successful. As a result, they built curriculum-focused collaboration into their daily work.

Remarkably, student proficiency at Achievement First schools has more than doubled since 2013. In the four years following its adoption of the Common Core, Achievement First’s students are again outperforming their peers and closing achievement gaps, performing within four points of their neighbors in Rye, New York on the 2015 NY Math Capstone. For teacher collaboration to meet this new, higher bar, the network took the following steps:

1. Disseminated **clear guidance and tools** to support teaching teams in improving instruction
2. Organized **teaching teams** in direct support of instructional improvement
3. Provided **sufficient time** for teaching teams to engage in meaningful professional learning and to prepare for instruction
4. Assigned **instructional experts** who have the time and support they need to facilitate collaborative time
5. Fostered a **strong adult culture** that emphasizes a growth-oriented mindset and a willingness to collaborate

1. Disseminated **CLEAR GUIDANCE AND TOOLS** to support teaching teams in improving instruction.

Achievement First recognized that its teachers would need support to achieve this vision. The network chose not to prescribe exactly how teachers should spend their collaborative time; instead, network leaders created a wide set of materials for teachers to help them focus on how to deliver rigorous, standards-aligned instruction.

Daily Lessons

In the past, Achievement First provided basic unit overviews and left the majority of daily lesson creation up to teachers. Now, however, the network has taken on the task of creating of **daily lessons**,

which outline the day’s specific objectives and connections to the Common Core standards as well as explicitly define the tasks, questions, and/or prompts teachers will use with their students. Because the network provides the *what*—high-quality, standards-aligned lesson plans—teachers are able to spend their time determining *how* to deliver them.

To create curricular materials, the network first invested in **Curriculum Fellows**, a part-time leadership role for teachers that offered a stipend in exchange for time spent writing or revising standards-aligned units and lessons. Achievement First created these roles in direct support of its shift to College and Career Ready Standards in 2012, initially employing over 150 Curriculum Fellows, whose stipends range from \$1,500 for initial unit-building to as much as \$8,000 to create daily materials. Achievement First also invested to ensure its materials were thoroughly vetted. The network offered \$2,000 stipends to 17 Teacher Testers, a separate role for classroom teachers to pilot and provide feedback on centrally-created materials, and sought the feedback of external reviewers (like the Dana Center, Success Academy, and Achievement Partners), which cost the network \$100,000-\$150,000 each year.

However, network leaders realized that to create a full suite of daily lessons they would need more in-house time and expertise than Curriculum Fellows alone could offer. As a result, Achievement First put more resources toward creating lessons at the system-wide level. The network now employs nine **Curriculum Development Specialists**, full-time employees dedicated to the creation and revision of these materials. To invest the \$800,000 needed to fund these positions, the network repurposed approximately \$250,000 from Curriculum Fellow stipends and deliberately left vacancies in other departments unfilled.

Teachers at Achievement First have embraced the materials, noting that by starting with the network-provided lessons, they can use their time more effectively. “I have a lot more time to internalize lessons and actually effectively teach them,” explained Najayra Rogers, a 5th year teacher at Achievement First Apollo Elementary School. The key to success is that network leaders built their curriculum in partnership with teachers and school leaders. There are many ways this happens: the Teacher Tester role offers teachers the chance to provide direct feedback on materials, and many Curriculum Development Specialists and Achievement Directors are former Achievement First teachers and school leaders.

“We’ll continue to develop new daily lesson resources in consultation with teachers to avoid the problems that happen when people write lesson plans from cubicles with no input from the people who actually teach them. We think this will increase student achievement overall, and make teachers’ jobs more sustainable.”

— Gillette Eckler, Director of Academic Operations and Strategy

Unpacking the Lesson and Student Responses

To help teachers shift from spending time creating lessons towards deeply understanding and adapting them for their context, the network also created **Intellectual Preparation Protocols (IPPs)**. An IPP is meant to help teachers engage in *practical* preparation, such as walking through the flow of a lesson, as well as *intellectual* preparation, in which teachers ground themselves in the big idea of a lesson. For example, an instructional expert might walk through a middle school math IPP with her team during collaborative planning time. She would ask the group, “What do we want kids to get out of this task?” Teachers would name the fundamental learning or understanding, and then connect their answers to concepts and skills students had learned in a prior year. This ensures that teachers truly understand the big idea as well as how it fits into the year over year trajectory of what students are learning.

The IPP also asks teachers to anticipate likely student misconceptions and create questions or supports to address them. This helps teachers think deeply about their lesson goals and proactively adjust their instruction to support them. Finally, teachers have an opportunity to practice their lesson, receiving feedback from a content expert and their fellow teachers. By walking through this process, teachers build a rigorous, thorough understanding of the lesson and have a concrete plan for how to deliver it.

Achievement First also refined and implemented [Looking at Student Work \(LASW\) protocols](#)—a well-established method to help teachers reflect and adjust their instruction based on gaps in students’ work on a given academic standard. During a LASW session in one Achievement First middle school, teachers reviewed excerpts from a recent writing assignment that asked students to use evidence to support an assertion. After reviewing the excerpts, teachers identified that their students had difficulty choosing evidence that adequately supported the prompt. The Academic Dean helped teachers unpack the cause of this gap and brainstorm concrete action steps they could take to adjust their instruction; the teachers planned to return to the concept of unpacking and annotating a prompt so that students would understand what they were being asked and be better able to select evidence as a result.

Student Data

Achievement First recognized that for teachers to make full use of the LASW protocol, they needed access to **timely, relevant, and easy-to-use student data** to identify opportunities to adjust their instruction. The network has invested roughly \$100,000 in a partnership with Illuminate, an online

platform that gives teachers access to comprehensive student data. Through Illuminate, teachers can quickly analyze student data by classroom, student, standard, or question, and use the results to adjust their instruction.

While these supports are provided by the network, Achievement First principals play a major role in adapting them and guiding their use in schools. Each Achievement First principal works with and coaches his or her Academic Deans on how to best use the materials to serve the unique needs of their teachers and students.

2. Organized **TEACHING TEAMS** in direct support of instructional improvement.

Achievement First did not simply encourage teachers to collaborate. Network leaders were explicit in defining the types of teams in which teachers should meet, connecting each team's design to their vision for the use of collaborative time. Achievement First organizes its teachers into **shared-content teams**, composed of teachers who share a common subject in adjacent grade levels, such as 5th and 6th grade English Language Arts teachers. In these teams teachers engage in the work of intellectual preparation and LASW. They may not all be teaching the exact same lesson plan at the same time, but they can focus on content-specific core skills or concepts that students build across grades. Achievement First principals are responsible for assigning teachers to each team, ensuring that teachers share as much content as possible and balancing expertise across teams.

While shared-content teams are the primary vehicle for improving instruction, Achievement First also organizes its teachers into **shared-student teams**, also known as grade-level teams, composed of teachers who share the same students, such as all 9th grade teachers. In these teams, teachers collaborate on how to structure interdisciplinary projects or activities or work to identify academic or behavioral interventions that need to be applied consistently throughout the day. Strong, vibrant school cultures are a core tenet of Achievement First's mission and vision; through shared-student teams, teachers work together to evolve and reinforce their school's unique culture. Principals engage deeply with the leaders of these teams, ensuring consistency and transparency as they work to shape culture.

3. Provided **SUFFICIENT TIME** for teachers and teaching teams to engage in meaningful professional learning and to prepare for instruction.

“We do spend more of teacher time on professional learning, but what has really propelled us forward has been evolving the use of this time.”

—Dacia Toll, Co-CEO and President

In addition to defining the types of teams that should exist, Achievement First is clear in defining roughly how long they should meet. The charter network implemented a longer school day and year than most traditional school systems—about 1,900 annual teacher work hours (as specified in contracts and district policies), compared to about 1,400 in a sample of districts ERS has studied. This allows them to devote a significant portion of teacher hours to professional learning. But while *how much* time they have is important, it's equally important *how well* they use that time. Achievement First repurposed existing individual planning time to give more time for collaborative planning and organized school schedules to allow sufficient time for shared-content teams to meet. These are steps that any other school system can consider implementing, even if they are not able to expand time in quite the same way.

Collaborative Time During the School Day

First, Achievement First ensured that any existing collaborative time in shared-content teams aligned to its new vision, and provided the protocols mentioned earlier. The network also increased time for **shared-content teams** from two hours to four hours each week. It is during this time that teachers and instructional experts walk through IPPs or LASW protocols. **Shared-student teams** meet for one hour each week to collaborate on academic or behavioral interventions that need to be applied consistently across classrooms. Finally, teachers also participate in 3.5 hours of schoolwide professional development each week. Achievement First principals have broad discretion over the use of this time based on the needs of their teachers. Typically, this time focuses on additional IPP and LASW; principals may also use this time to discuss school culture more broadly. See Figure 1 (next page) for an example of a typical Achievement First teacher schedule.

The network respects that teacher time is a precious and finite resource and deliberately attempted to repurpose existing time before adding to it. Achievement First re-purposed existing individual planning blocks to provide time for shared-content and shared-student teams to meet. Teachers

FIGURE 1 EXAMPLE AF TEACHER SCHEDULE

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
7:05-8:05 AM	Teach	Teach	Teach	Teach	Meet with shared-content team
8:05-9:05 AM	Teach	Teach	Teach	Teach	
9:05-10:05 AM	Teach	Teach	Teach	Teach	Teach
10:05-11:05 AM	Teach	Teach	Teach	Teach	Teach
11:05-12:05 PM	Meet with shared-student team	Individual Planning	Meet with shared-content team	Individual Planning	Teach
12:05-1:05 PM	Coaching & Observation	Individual Planning		Individual Planning	Duties
1:05-2:05 PM	Individual Planning	Individual Planning	Individual Planning	Individual Planning	Schoolwide Professional Development
2:05-3:05 PM	Duties	Duties	Duties	Duties	
3:05-4:05 PM	Teach	Teach	Teach	Teach	
4:05-4:35 PM	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	

typically had three hour-long blocks of independent planning time each day; now, one of those blocks each week is spent in time with shared-student teams, and two are spent with shared-content teams. The network also provides early release time for students on Fridays, which enables its weekly schoolwide professional development. Achievement First has pursued this strategy since the beginning, and it is a trade-off parents choose when enrolling their children in Achievement First schools. The network does not systematically provide any enrichment or programs for students during this time, but individual schools work with families to find affordable options.

While the network provides specific guidance on the lengths of time for which different teams should meet, principals have discretion over exactly how to build this time into their schools' schedules. Network leaders ensure principals are supported in this work, providing example schedules and thought partnership.

Professional Learning Beyond the School Day

Achievement First also provides time for teacher professional learning beyond the typical school day, including data days, network-wide Days of Practice, new teacher training, and several days of professional development in August for all staff.

During Data Days teachers and school leaders analyze the results of interim assessments and norm on how open-ended assessments will be scored. Together, they determine what changes need to be made to instruction, surfacing schoolwide trends that might be harder to identify during team Looking at Student Work sessions.

During network-wide **Days of Practice**, teachers from across the network come together to work on improving their instruction. Achievement First defines an overarching sequence for the year; for example, the first few weeks of the school year focus on building culture, while later weeks focus on improving instructional rigor, and final weeks may focus more deeply on preparing for end of year assessments. Days of Practice follow this arc, providing deeper support for teachers related to the particular focus of each quarter. Part of these days are dedicated to Achievement Directors and network-level content experts modeling the IPP. Achievement Directors walk through an example lesson with teachers of the same subject from multiple grades and schools; together, the teachers and experts practice taking apart the lesson and planning how to deliver it to students. Later in the day, teachers work in shared-content teams from their school to apply the same process to their own lessons. Principals also have dedicated time to work with their teachers on applying their new skills, ensuring that even network-provided professional learning is sensitive to the needs of a particular school.

Achievement First also provides significant **professional learning and new teacher training in August**. All of the network’s teachers come together for five days to focus heavily on content and intellectual preparation. This provides teachers the opportunity to focus on what Common Core-aligned instruction looks like, digging deeply into individual standards and watching videos of exemplary instruction. Teachers and leaders spend another seven days at individual school sites, providing additional time for intellectual preparation and focusing on school culture, schoolwide routines and procedures, and other planning for the new school year. The network’s new teachers spend 10 additional days before the start of the school year to focus on lesson taxonomy, pedagogy, and classroom management. Because the network provides this time at the beginning of the year for teachers, they are better able to devote team and professional learning time throughout the year to content specifically.

FIGURE 2 EXAMPLES OF TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

	Allotted Time	Purpose
Data Days	1 full day, every 6 weeks	Dedicated to grading and analyzing interim assessment results
Days of Practice	1 full day, every 6 weeks	Dedicated to helping teachers improve instruction
August PD & New Teacher Training	12 days for all teachers in August and 10 additional days for new teachers	Dedicated to aligning as a network on and preparing teachers to execute rigorous, standards-aligned instruction

These combined opportunities mean that Achievement First teachers spend about 45 percent of their annual teacher hours in collaborative and individual planning time and professional learning days. This aligns well with what researchers found when they looked at four high-performing school systems from around the world—on average, teachers spend 30 to 35 percent of their time outside of the classroom “working in teams to develop and improve lessons, observing and critiquing classes, and working with struggling students.”¹

4. Assigned **INSTRUCTIONAL EXPERTS** who have the time and support they need to facilitate collaborative planning time.

Achievement First recognized that to achieve the network’s vision for collaborative time, teachers needed access to content-specific experts who are both deeply familiar with the relevant standards and curriculum as well as highly trained in how to facilitate collaborative time. This is a distributed leadership model, in which expert support is no longer limited to an individual principal or administrator. Achievement First ensures this expertise is available at multiple levels:

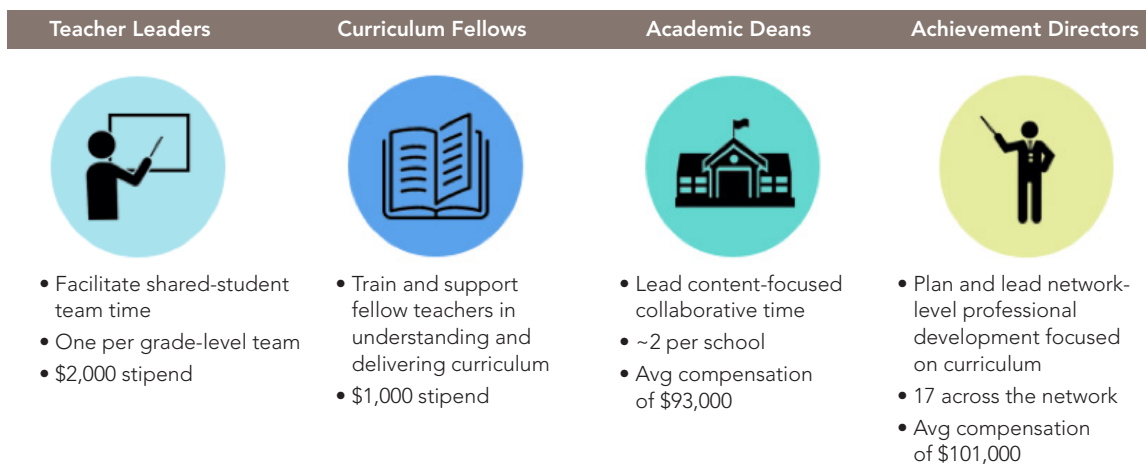
1. **Academic Deans:** Each Achievement First school has two Academic Deans—school-based content experts who work closely with teachers, which includes facilitating collaborative time. Academic Deans have deep content knowledge and are coached by Achievement Directors and Regional Superintendents to build and refine this expertise. Academic Deans facilitate time for shared-content teams, leading teachers through LASW and IPP. Academic Deans are not usually asked to take on the same range of responsibilities as a typical Assistant Principal would. Their role is primarily to support teachers through observation and coaching, facilitate collaborative time, and lead professional development; they spend little time on operations or student discipline. As a result, their compensation is typically lower than that of an AP, allowing Achievement First to hire more people into the position to ensure sufficient content expertise in schools.
2. **Teacher Leaders:** In each school, teachers have the opportunity to take on leadership roles for a \$2,000 stipend. Some teacher leaders serve as coaches, observing and providing feedback to their fellow teachers. Each grade-level team has a teacher leader who facilitates the team’s time. A grade-level team leader also meets with his or her principal weekly or biweekly to connect the team’s work to the school’s overall vision and priorities. Each principal has discretion over the number of and selection of teacher leaders in his or her school. Most teachers simply receive the stipend for their time; in some cases, however, the leadership role requires that the teacher also have a reduced teaching load, which comes at an additional cost.

1. Jensen, B., Sonnemann, J., Roberts-Hull, K., and Hunter, A. *Beyond PD: Teacher Professional Learning in High-Performing Systems*. Washington, DC: National Center on Education and the Economy, 2016.

3. **Curriculum Fellows:** As we mentioned earlier, teachers can also serve as Curriculum Fellows. In addition to creating standards-aligned curricular supports, Curriculum Fellows bring their deep knowledge of the content as they collaborate with their fellow teachers. Now that the network has shifted the task of lesson creation from Curriculum Fellows to Curriculum Development Specialists, Curriculum Fellows can spend less time preparing lessons and more time training and supporting their fellow teachers. Curriculum Fellows lead schoolwide professional development sessions that focus on “unit unpacking,” in which teachers work together to understand a unit’s standards and themes as well as how students will be assessed. Curriculum Fellows typically spend 15-20 hours each year in this role and receive a \$1,000 stipend. Achievement First teachers interested in becoming Curriculum Fellows apply for the role for a given subject, and that subject’s Achievement Director makes the final selection.

4. **Achievement Directors:** At the network level, Achievement Directors are content-specific experts who shape curriculum and instruction across the network. Each Achievement Director focuses on a specific subject, such as math, English Language Arts, or social studies. Achievement Directors work with other network leaders to determine the system-wide vision for their subjects’ curriculum and instruction and build and refine the curricula and assessments. Achievement Directors also plan and lead network-wide, content-focused professional development activities to support teachers in using these materials. Achievement First’s 17 Achievement Directors each focus deeply on a particular subject and earn an average of \$98,000.

FIGURE 3 EXPERT SUPPORT IN ACHIEVEMENT FIRST



Achievement First has also made a significant investment to ensure that their content experts have the support *they* need to facilitate time well. The network emphasizes “having well-trained instructional leaders who know how to facilitate professional collaboration and learning because they’ve been explicitly trained on how to do this,” explains Katie Capella, Director of Talent Development.

Achievement First provides Curriculum Fellows with four release days each year, during which Fellows work intensively on building curriculum and receive real-time feedback from Achievement Directors.

Achievement First also holds a training every June for its principals and Academic Deans. This training specifically focuses on how to execute IPPs and LASW protocols, as well as how to hold teachers accountable for using them well. School leaders attend sessions that reinforce the relationship between the protocols and the network's instructional vision and that provide an opportunity to practice using them. One document from the training asks, "How will engaging in Step 1 of the Lesson-Level Intellectual Preparation Protocol drive successful student achievement outcomes in the math classroom?"

Achievement First's principals work closely with the content experts in their building. In addition to the June training, principals and Academic Deans also attend weekly regional trainings together. Principals observe and coach their Academic Deans as well, ensuring cohesive support for teachers from both roles. Achievement First principals also have discretion over selecting the teacher leaders in their buildings and share the responsibility of coaching them with their Academic Deans.

5. Fostered a **STRONG ADULT CULTURE** that emphasizes a growth-oriented mindset and a willingness to collaborate.

Culture has been a central focus for Achievement First's leaders since the network's inception. The network's mission is to provide equal educational opportunity for all children, to serve as proof points that systems *can* close achievement gaps, and to inspire broader reform in public education. Network leaders have worked deliberately to create a strong adult culture in which teachers and leaders work collaboratively to support this mission and improve instruction and student outcomes.

Feedback

In Achievement First, commitment to continuous improvement starts at the top. Network leaders continually seek feedback from teachers and are responsive to this feedback. Teachers help refine the network-provided protocols and supports, such as giving feedback on the IPP or testing daily lesson materials. At the end of a network-wide Day of Practice, network leaders asked teachers for their thoughts on the day's structure and content. At the start of her session, an Achievement Director explained to teachers what she had heard in feedback from the network's previous Day of Practice and how she planned to address that feedback during their time together.

School leaders also model this behavior. Academic Deans are coached by their principals and Regional Superintendents, who often observe them in their work with teachers. At the end of a LASW-focused session in one Achievement First middle school, the Academic Dean prompted teachers for "pluses and deltas"—meaning, items to keep and items to change—related to her facilitation. By ensuring the theme of continuous improvement can be found at all levels, network leaders create a culture in which all staff feel comfortable adopting a growth mindset.

The network's strong culture also plays out during collaborative time. During a LASW protocol in one Achievement First middle school, teachers were willing to disagree with one another, embodying the same norms of respect and listening they demand of their students in the classroom. They built off of one another's answers, challenged each other's assumptions, and spoke candidly about their perceived areas of weakness in their own practice, soliciting suggestions and ideas for improvement.

As in most systems, each Achievement First principal is responsible for shaping the unique culture in his or her building. Each school reinforces the network's core values of respect, enthusiasm, achievement, citizenship, and hard work, and the principal translates those values into behavior and schoolwide expectations. Principals meet with the leaders of shared-student teams to ensure a connection between the school's culture and the day-to-day of classroom instruction. Principals also spend time during schoolwide Friday PD to discuss school culture with all teachers.

When the network came together in its Day of Practice, President and co-CEO Dacia Toll opened the day by underscoring the importance of Achievement First teachers' work, highlighting achievements made by the network's students and the teachers' roles in enabling those achievements. She explained how the topics and conversations of that Day of Practice would support this work, so teachers understood this was not an isolated development day; rather, it was an opportunity for them to work with network leaders to further their practice and deliver the strongest possible instruction to their students. Network leaders also prompted teachers to cite what they were grateful for in their practice, connecting the challenge of their work to its joys and triumphs.

FIGURE 4 "GRATITUDE SLIPS" FROM AN ACHIEVEMENT FIRST DAY OF PRACTICE

"I am grateful to all of my teammates that I get to work with on a daily basis to help us drive high student achievement. They all work so hard and bring so much joy to our children and I'm grateful that I am a part of such a strong, well-balanced team."

—a teacher at Achievement First
East NY Middle School

"I am grateful that I feel so incredibly supported by my coach and leadership team at our school. They have my back and my development in mind always. The people I work with are selfless, caring, and real. They make it easy to come to work every day!"

—a teacher at Achievement First
Bushwick Middle School

Achievement First's culture both enables and is supported by the shifts we have described. Because teachers have adopted a growth mindset, they understand the value of Achievement First's approach to professional learning; while network leaders' investment in time for professional learning signals its importance to teachers. Achievement First did not build a culture overnight; it took time, perseverance, and patience. However, network leaders ensured that the culture in which it invested was consistent with its overall mission, the needs of its teachers, and ultimately its vision for teacher time.

REORGANIZING RESOURCES IN SUPPORT OF COLLABORATION

Achievement First uses resources—people, time, and money—in deliberate ways to support this strategic approach to professional learning. System leaders dedicated approximately \$2 million in short-term funding to create standards-aligned curricula and add professional learning time shortly after adopting new standards. They now invest in an ongoing, annual basis largely in instructional materials as well as network-level staff to create and revise collaboration and planning tools like Intellectual Preparation Protocols. System leaders repurposed funding—from filling vacancies in other departments to new network-level positions, specifically Curriculum Development Specialists.

Achievement First's deliberate investment in teacher and expert time enables its highly effective collaboration as well. Of the nearly \$25 million that Achievement First dedicates to professional learning every year, roughly \$16 million—or 65 percent—goes to teacher time alone. This time is built into a teacher's regular week and year, and thus does not reflect a direct expense to the network above and beyond its compensation to teachers.

Achievement First's **workforce composition** made this type of investment in teacher collaboration both easier and more important. Achievement First is a fairly young network, established in 2003, and a number of its individual schools are even younger. Most Achievement First teachers are in their first 10 years of teaching.² So, while the network offers a higher starting salary than its peer districts and opportunities to earn more through career and compensation pathways, its young workforce means it maintains a lower average teacher salary. As a result, Achievement First is able to extend its teacher day and year at a lower cost than a district with a greater share of veteran teachers and/or higher average compensation.

The network has used its **flexibility over teacher time** to provide seven times more professional learning time for teachers when compared to a typical urban district. Achievement First's teachers spend over half of their time outside of the classroom, devoting more time to professional learning activities. Because of the longer day and year, however, this investment does not come at the expense of the *total* amount of instructional time for students.

2. Achievement First retained 74 percent of its teachers in 2015-16 and is focusing on increasing that rate through its commitment to adult culture and professional development. Through its Teacher Career Pathway, Achievement First is working to retain its most effective and experienced teachers; thus far, the network retains 87 percent of its distinguished and master teachers, the highest stages of Achievement First's Career Pathway, a higher rate than any other group in the network.

FIGURE 5 SUMMARY OF INVESTMENTS IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Investment	Cost (in \$)	Cost (as % of Budget)
Provide curricular materials and guidance to support teacher teams.		
Start-Up Costs		
Initial professional development on Common Core for teachers, principals, and Academic Deans	\$1,691,000	
External review of curricula	\$405,000	
Subtotal	\$2,096,000	
Ongoing Annual Costs		
Instructional Materials—Textbooks	\$1,666,000	0.9%
Network-level staff time spent reviewing curriculum & assessments and developing & revising protocols	\$918,000	0.5%
Curriculum Development Specialists	\$720,000	0.4%
Instructional Materials—Assessments	\$432,000	0.2%
Curriculum Fellows	\$225,000	0.1%
Network-level staff time spent providing student data	\$161,000	0.1%
Illuminate data system	\$98,000	0.1%
Subtotal	\$4,220,000	2.3%
Total	\$6,316,000	
Provide sufficient time for teaching teams to engage in meaningful professional learning and preparation for instruction.		
Ongoing Annual Costs		
Teacher time spent in weekly collaborative planning	\$5,517,000	3.3%
Teacher time spent in Friday afternoon PD	\$3,862,000	2.3%
Teacher time spent in August PD	\$3,221,000	2.0%
Teacher time spent in Data Days	\$1,610,000	1.0%
Teacher time spent in Days of Practice	\$1,074,000	0.7%
Teacher time spent in New Teacher Training	\$800,000	0.5%
Total	\$16,084,000	9.9%
Assign instructional experts who have the time and support they need to facilitate collaborative time.		
Ongoing Annual Costs		
Training and support for principals & Academic Deans	\$2,032,000	1.1%
Academic Dean time spent preparing for and leading collaborative planning	\$1,290,000	0.7%
Teacher leader time spent preparing for and leading collaborative planning	\$910,000	0.5%
Teacher leader stipends to lead collaborative planning	\$279,000	0.2%
Total	\$4,511,000	2.5%
Total Start-Up Costs	\$2,096,000	
Total Ongoing Costs	\$24,815,000	14.6%
Total Resource Investment	\$26,911,000	15.9%

Achievement First’s flexibility over teacher time does not exempt the network from **careful resource tradeoffs**. System leaders respect that teacher time is a finite resource and know that excessive hours comes with the risk of teacher burnout and the costs associated with higher turnover. As a result, Achievement First has taken deliberate steps to mitigate these risks. Whenever possible, time is first repurposed rather than added on top of a teacher’s already full schedule. When school and system leaders recognized that teachers needed to spend more time on intellectual preparation for lessons, they deliberately reduced the amount of time teachers needed to spend on basic lesson creation. In addition, a key benefit of real-time coaching during observations is that it reduces the amount of time teachers would normally spend in formal debriefs discussing what could or should have gone differently.

Outside of teacher time, other resource tradeoffs were also made to facilitate the shifts described above. When network leaders decided to centralize the creation of daily lesson resources, they reduced their investment in Curriculum Fellows and eliminated other network-based staff positions to fund the new full-time Curriculum Development Specialist roles. In the past, Achievement First built a custom data system known as Athena; however, when they discovered Athena was not sufficiently providing teachers easy access to student data, network leaders redirected their investment in Athena to their new partnership with Illuminate.

FIGURE 6 IMPORTANT FEATURES OF ACHIEVEMENT FIRST’S APPROACH

Context	Choice	Impact
College and Career Ready Standards raised the bar for instruction	Created curriculum in-house, at the network-level	Teachers can focus on intellectual preparation of existing high-quality lessons, not creating them from scratch
Largely early career workforce; needs support	Introduced tools like the Intellectual Preparation Protocol and Looking at Student Work protocols	All teachers work together to deeply understand and prepare for lessons, respond to student work
Few constraints over time; longer school day	Repurpose general or individual planning time to collaborative, curricula-focused planning time	Devoted sufficient time to professional learning by making use of available resources

LESSONS FOR OTHER SCHOOL SYSTEMS

An extraordinary amount of hard work on the part of educators and students made it possible to redesign professional learning and achieve impressive gains in student proficiency. This work was directly facilitated through highly strategic decisions at the system-level. These decisions and lessons learned are applicable across a variety of contexts. Some takeaways for other school systems include:

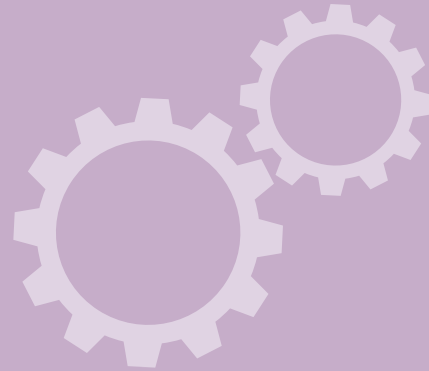
- Achievement First began by **tailoring its strategy to the needs of its workforce**. Network leaders recognize that their workforce consists of less experienced teachers, who as a result have unique needs and require considerable support.
- Because the network places such a **strong emphasis on values and norms**, it fosters a strong, positive and collaborative culture. Teachers are willing to take on significantly more professional learning time during the week and year because they value input from their peers, actively seek out feedback from experts, and are highly invested in continuously improving their own and each other's instruction. This culture both supports and becomes stronger through effective collaboration.
- Achievement First also embeds **co-creation and shared accountability** in its approach to professional learning. Network leaders build and implement professional learning strategy in partnership with teachers and school leaders. Achievement First also creates opportunities for teachers and school leaders to own and shape elements of professional learning. Furthermore, while network leaders provide teachers and school leaders with significant support to ensure they are set up to deliver and participate in high-quality professional learning and collaboration, they also hold them accountable for doing so. One way Achievement First ensures this shared accountability is through its organizational structure; teachers receive feedback from their principals and Academic Deans, who are in turn held accountable by regional superintendents, who are held accountable by Superintendent and co-CEO Doug McCurry. Additionally, high quality implementation of IPP, LASW, and practice-based PD are the very dimensions by which Achievement First evaluates its school leaders.
- Finally, Achievement First ensures it has structures in place to reflect, adjust, and pursue **continuous improvement**. The network does this both informally, frequently seeking feedback in interactions with teachers and school leaders, as well as formally. Achievement First uses sophisticated data systems, including Illuminate for student data and Platinum, its teacher evaluation data system, but the network also engages in deliberate cycles of inquiry and directly incorporates teacher and school leader feedback into strategy moving forward.

To meet the needs they identified in 2013, leaders in Achievement First leveraged existing strengths to create a coherent, connected professional learning system deeply embedded in teachers' day-to-day work and rooted in the needs of teachers and students. Other school systems can learn from these powerful approaches to "Connected Professional Learning."

TAKE ACTION

Achievement First has generously shared examples of schedules, design guides, adult learning curricula and more that make their model work. Examples include:

- Collaborative Planning Time Agenda
- School Schedules: K-8 and HS
- Daily Lesson Resource
- Intellectual Preparation Protocol
- Looking at Student Work Protocol
- School Friday PD Agenda
- Day of Practice Agenda



You can find these in the Professional Learning Toolkit at:

www.erstrategies.org/library/connected_professional_learning

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