



NEW CURRICULUM, NEW SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Beyond Buying the Book



MAY 2021

A spotlight on Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, North Carolina

Profile At A Glance



18th largest school district in the US



460 middle grades teachers in the district



63% students of color



60% students receive Free or Reduced-Price Lunch, district-wide

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) is one of the largest school districts in the US. That includes over 33,000 kids in Middle School alone. With 32 middle schools, using varying curriculums, CMS saw schools and students excelling at different rates. A systemwide assessment by CMS showed that math, especially in middle schools in higher-poverty areas, was a key opportunity area.

CMS decided to unify the math curriculum across all schools as a way of eliminating one variable for inequity. The challenge was how to make implementation work for students and educators. Embracing a new curriculum takes time and support to help even the most seasoned educators. What about when it's also being implemented to address inequity?

Program

New Teacher Center helped CMS create Professional Learning Communities (PLC) structures and routines for educators based on the new middle school math curriculum. The goal: support curriculum rollout and ensure a coherent student experience with the content. Our work centered on equity and teacher confidence.

Impact

- ↳ 40-42 schools supported through NTC.
- ↳ NTC's engagement was extended to include 7th grade math as well as 8th grade, providing deeper support, earlier in the curriculum.
- ↳ Noted improvements at schools with higher levels of support.

Targeted Challenges

Equity for students

What was causing these schools to be so different in their student outcomes? CMS wanted to ensure students' needs were a part of the curriculum implementation.

Curriculum strategies

Educators needed to learn some of the conceptual strategies in a safe, collaborative, supportive environment to fully embrace the new curriculum.

Level of support

One-off summer afternoons would not be enough to ensure the new curriculum took root. To really make a difference in student outcomes, educators needed a program with a cadence and structure that would help them truly succeed.



PHOTO CREDIT: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools



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We partnered to create spaces that supported teachers in understanding the instructional routines, arcs of learning, and progression of standards throughout the curriculum. Teachers were empowered to focus on students' needs and interests.

Allison Paul, Associate Program Consultant
New Teacher Center

Targeted Challenges

New Curriculum Implementation

Inequities in Middle School Math

% of students who scored not proficient on state tests was:

8%

higher for female students

11%

higher for economically disadvantaged students

27%

higher for English Language Learners

23–37%

higher for Black and Hispanic students

Equity for students: Focusing on student needs

It can take several years for a teacher to feel like they have confidently mastered a curriculum. That means that year one of a new curriculum is just about the teacher trying to orient and understand the new content — leaving little room to focus on the needs of their students. NTC helped PLCs create structures around curriculum and student needs, enabling cohort groups to support teachers and educators through this process. We found that in year one of a new curriculum, the PLC conversations were mostly focused on teaching and content alone, not on students. By focusing so intensely on delivery and metrics, we were missing out on seeing students through an equity lens.

Curriculum strategies: Growing the craft of teaching

Introducing a new curriculum often requires unlearning / relearning in order to build better habits. That can leave even the most seasoned educators feeling under threat, like their craft of teaching isn't good enough, or what they've done in the past isn't what's best for their kids. They may feel like their identity as a teacher is put into question. Coaching for new curriculum needs to consider the hearts and minds of every learner, adults and kids. Early in our work with CMS it was clear that many of the educators (teachers and coaches alike) needed greater support. The curriculum taught math in a way that was very different, and required time and support to help these educators unpack and tailor the curriculum to their own unique teaching styles

Level of support: Meeting the need for high quality coaching

Frontloading curriculum rollout during summer training can leave educators feeling overwhelmed and unsupported as the year progresses. As units come up, teachers start over again. Simply put, coaching wasn't happening enough to support movement through units, leaving teachers no space to unpack content and curriculum. The structure and process of coaching wasn't adequate to meet the high level of support needed. It wasn't enough for a coach to be in-school once a semester to have real impact on student outcomes.



PHOTO CREDIT: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

Solution Process

Building Tools for New Content

There's no simple solution to rolling out a new curriculum. It requires communication, collaboration, and a partner who's in it for the long haul. A single summer training won't cut it. NTC worked hand in hand with CMS to build and evolve a plan for professional development that empowered teachers to embrace the new curriculum and make it their own.

Action Steps

Create safe spaces for adults to learn a new curriculum together

NTC worked to create trusting learning environments where coaches, teachers, and educators felt comfortable unpacking a new curriculum together. We provided PLC leads the space to break down the curriculum and build understanding together with support from NTC and the district. We brought together coaching experts and curriculum experts, and together we mapped out how to coach for each unit so teachers could adopt new strategies.

Most importantly, we invested in building relationships. The math teachers at CMS weren't left to navigate the content and curriculum alone.

Professional Learning Communities: Supporting teachers, centering students

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are a space for teachers to make decisions. Within this collective space they decide as a team HOW they are going to teach a curriculum. These important decisions can either boost a student's support, or become an unintentional roadblock. We focus on fostering a PLC space where students are placed at the forefront of the conversation, and decisions are based on data, not assumptions.

Adapt coaching to be a curriculum-based support journey (unit by unit)

Initially, our coaching structure had us being on-site in each school once a semester. However, we wondered if we were missing an opportunity to improve outcomes by increasing support. We picked 5 pilot schools and changed to a cadence of 2x/month., enabling coaching support for educators as the curriculum progressed, unit by unit. We built a planning rhythm for tackling content understanding before entering a module. More support meant better impact. Educators in the pilot schools reported seeing their students take more ownership of their learning in class. Consistent and frequent embedded high-quality professional development changed outcomes for kids.



PHOTO CREDIT: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

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When teachers trust the curriculum and trust the students to be able to work with it, you can see it in the classroom. The kids are all talking to each other now. It's not business as usual. They know: We are all math people.

Rob Lechner
Secondary Math Specialist
Charlotte-Mecklenburg
Schools

Connect coaching to the larger system to create effective, meaningful change

Coaching is just one piece of the equation when it comes to student success. It's important to understand and position coaching within the larger structure of the school system, and how that connects back to students. We worked to integrate the student experience into our Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) content and conversations. Educators soon realized that coaching and PLCs could be a key tool to help share resources and knowledge throughout the entire educational ecosystem. When educators are empowered to support each other, they can focus on what really matters: helping their students thrive.

About our approach

NTC partners with educators across the country – from Pre K to high school, in districts big and small – to develop localized solutions to their biggest challenges. Our services aren't one-size-fits-all; they're collaborative and customized to meet the unique needs of each school and district. Our work starts with listening and leads to a collaborative plan on how to make real change happen for students.



Impact
approximately
32,000 middle
grades students



40-42 schools supported
through NTC



Total Time
of Support - 12,505
minutes



Noted improvements
by mid-year in PLC
Conversation and Shared
Leadership scores

Impact

Strengthening Communities of Support

Future Forward Plan

NTC's engagement was extended to include 7th grade math as well as 8th grade. That means we can provide deeper support, earlier in the curriculum. We're working to develop a phased approach to coaching, with year 1 focused on content mastery, and year 2 focused on student needs.

Key Takeaways

- Create safe spaces for adults to learn a new curriculum together
- Adapt coaching to be a curriculum-based support journey
- Connect coaching to the larger system to create effective, meaningful change



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What makes NTC unique is the way they use the content to coach others. It's enhanced how teachers, teacher leaders, and district staff unpack the content and have it stick. Bite-sized action steps grounded in the content gave everyone a model of how you do this type of coaching well.

Dr. Brandy Nelson, Executive Director of Learning and Teaching
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools



Stories From The Field

Light bulbs going off everywhere

Michelle Johnson,
Master Teacher Leader, Middle Grades Math
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

Some people make you feel safe and invite your trust.

That's Michelle.

Her warmth is deep, washing out in waves of smile-filled conversation. After serving students and teaching math for 23 years, nearly all of it with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS), thousands of learning experiences give her unmistakable joy and enthusiasm.

Michelle started coaching two years ago, right as CMS began implementing the new middle school math curriculum. The effort to support teachers amid a significant change wasn't easy. "There was a friction at the beginning," said Michelle. "Teachers wanted to keep doing things their way, which I get. But what matters most is the students."

As a part of the change and implementation management, Michelle led a PLC to provide direct teacher support. But first, she needed to create an empathetic space to boost credibility and confidence. "I worked hard to build trust and show teachers I was in it right alongside them," she said. Michelle did a lot of pre-work, walking through the problems, digesting content, and investing a lot of planning time. Throughout that process, she received support and collaborated with NTC to build the PLC's culture and content.

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That support from NTC showed me that this is how I need to coach. This is how I need to bring curriculum to the teachers in our PLC.

Michelle Johnson

Mentor Teacher Leader, Middle Grades Math, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools



PHOTO CREDIT: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

“I turned to Allison, my trusty lead from NTC, to figure out what to do first,” said Michelle. “We dug into the curriculum together. We decided what to focus on and had a dialogue about what we needed to do and why.” She felt empowered to coach and customize how to bring the curriculum to the teachers in the PLC.

Today, Michelle is proud to say that she’s not “running the PLC.” Instead, she’s artfully working on the edges to help the teachers lead the conversations and collaboration. There is a shared vision and strong teamwork, creating a space for creativity and problem-solving. Every week, with every unit, the PLC asks:

- ↳ **What are we teaching?**
- ↳ **Why are we teaching it?**
- ↳ **How are we going to teach it so it can reach every student?**

The PLC is leaning into access and inclusion in the curriculum, knowing how different students are embracing (or not) the material. For instance, Michelle helped teachers coordinate and adapt lesson plans for English Language Learners and Exceptional Children. There’s a real sense that the PLC’s cooperative work is helping iterate on better designs for different students and classrooms.

“Now, our teachers are feeling confident in themselves,” said Michelle. “They know they can give information to students in ways they can access. And the benefit is that the students are learning and enjoying it.”

Michelle’s warmth brightens more. Over the last few months, her pop-ins to classrooms find assured teachers and highly engaged students. Students are motivated to teach the lesson to each other and call back connections to previous units. “They truly understand it and can explain it,” said Michelle. “You can see the light bulbs going off everywhere.”



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