



## **DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP TO REDESIGN A SCHOOL ORGANIZATION**

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Cahn Fellow Cohort 20

## ABSTRACT

As part of an Instructional Leadership Support Team, non-classroom teachers represent an opportunity to ensure high-quality education for emergent multilingual students in a dual language program. However, is it enough to have teachers out of the classroom as teacher leaders to create a positive impact on student learning?

Leadership development through systems and structures is critical for these teacher leaders to use the skills that allow them to be effective in the classroom and exert influence beyond their classroom.

## INTRODUCTION

After over a decade as a principal, I could never enhance teacher leadership through a distributed leadership approach like in the school year 2022-2023. In the post-pandemic school years, the district has provided additional resources at the school for this purpose. To have teachers in non-classroom positions has become a unique opportunity to establish systems and structures to enhance quality instruction. This is with the ultimate goal of making an impact on student learning.

There are 464 students enrolled at TALCOTT. 62.1% are Low-Income Students. 21.1% are Diverse Learners, and 54.5% are English Learners. The largest demographic at TALCOTT is Hispanic. This demographic makes up 83% of the student population. The second greatest demographic is White at 9.7%, followed by Black at 4.7%.

Talcott Fine Arts and Museum Academy is located in a gentrified area on the north side of Chicago. Most families don't live within the school boundaries. They come from different points of the city. In the last 15 years, the school's reputation has resulted from the main school's programmatic aspects: dual language education, fine arts, museum integration, and Reggio Emilia in early childhood. Families can apply for a spot through the fine arts magnet cluster lottery. Application data trends show that families apply mainly because of the dual language program and Reggio Emilia. As parents constantly express, the other programmatic aspects are a "great complement" to the curriculum.

According to Dr. Soltero, "a well-thought-out and carefully planned dual language program is much more likely to 1) offer high quality cohesive and well-coordinated curriculum and instruction; 2) show positive and consistent gains in students' biliteracy, academic and sociocultural competencies, and achievement; 3) attract and retain committed and highly qualified teachers; 4) generate greater parent/family satisfaction with their children's education;

and 5) mitigate economic, societal and educational inequities through access to and inclusion in a rich and engaging additive bilingual education (Soltero, 2016).

Collier and Thomas have led research on dual language education through longitudinal studies of student achievement in different bilingual education programs. Districts often use their research for decision-making purposes. In Appendix A, there is a graph that shows that dual language is the most effective bilingual education model for English learners.

The Talcott mission has language that aligns with the principles of dual language.

*Talcott Fine Arts and Museum Academy focuses on every student's strengths to foster curious and independent learners. Our whole-child approach is rooted in our community's core values:*

- *Develop creative thinking through Fine Arts and Language to enrich student voice.*
- *Encourage students to become young advocates who are engaged in civic and social justice causes.*
- *Create experiences in cultural spaces, both inside and outside of Talcott.*
- *Support students in their personal growth to effectively communicate with others.*
- *Embrace biliteracy, bilingualism, and multiculturalism.*

Talcott is one of the 39 district schools providing dual language education. This Cahn Fellows Project represents an important opportunity to provide light, first on how distributed leadership can be an impactful approach to ensuring high-quality education for English Learners, second on the importance of dual language in a district where Latino(a) students are the majority (46.7%). English Learners represent 21.6% of the student population.

After 17 years of implementation, the dual language program has grown to the point that currently, 90% of students are in a dual language classroom. We are almost a wall-to-wall dual language school! Consequently, the main instructional focus is now dual language. At the end of the school year 21-22, as part of our work in the Instructional Leadership Team, I presented the importance of assessing dual language education at Talcott to inform an action plan. This was the first normal school year after the pandemic years, and it was a critical time to recommit and reimagine. The last school quality report that the school received was in the SY19-20 with a Level 1+, which was the highest rating. The district has undergone a multiple-year process to redesign school accountability and a strategic plan involving distributed leadership, the instructional leadership team, teaching leadership positions, initiatives such as a culturally responsive curriculum, and MTSS. In relation to metrics, the district moved away from NWEA, which was at the center of school accountability, to focus on the Illinois Assessment Readiness as the main standardized test. All this became the context for the SY22-23 to start

developing a Continuous Improvement Work Plan (CIWP). In Appendix B, there is a visual of the CIWP foundations. After a thorough data analysis at Talcott, we focused on the Instructional Core: Curriculum and Instruction and Inclusive and Supportive Learning to develop the CIWP for the next three years.

The school received their budgets to prepare for the school year 2022-2023. Talcott received the budget that included additional positions: MTSS Lead, English Language Teacher Program, Dual Language Coordinator, and Case Manager as non-classroom positions. Appendix C is the first visual of an instructional support system that would evolve over the months.

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In the Summer of 2022, the instructional support team comprised three current staff members and a new staff member to the community. One of the current staff members was new to the role. It is important to add that Talcott had six new teachers last school year. It is relevant to mention that it was also the assistant principal's first year. To have my assistant principal as my Ally in the Cahn Fellows program was an invaluable opportunity to know each other, collaborate, and determine our collective instructional leadership.

The availability of the teacher leaders determined the amount of collaboration between the administration and the teacher leaders. In conjunction with some assumptions based on their prior experience, this led to a weak start of the instructional support system. In the first weeks of school, the administrators observed that the engagement of the MTSS Instructional Coach (MIC) differed greatly from that of the Dual Language Coordinator (DLC) and the English Language Program Teacher (ELPT). While the MIC built relationships with the new teachers, completed informal observations, and created action plans, the DLC and ELPT mainly did "computer work." There was also a concern about their participation and contributions in different team meetings. Teachers expressed frustration about not getting support to address the needs of English Learners, specifically of the newcomers whose number started growing rapidly in the school.

As the administration, we started observing teachers formally and informally, especially teachers with 0-3 years of experience; we realized that instructional practice was an area for improvement. Immediately, we started discussing this problem in our leadership meetings (Fellow and Ally) to problem solve. It was obvious that our instructional leadership was needed

for talented staff members out of the classroom to reach their potential as instructional coaches and critical friends.

As the principal, this was a critical year, with important changes in the school organization, our school priorities, and new district initiatives. My goal was to establish the conditions to create a distributed leadership system in which teams became the power of the organization. My vision was that the assistant principal, the MTSS Instructional Coach, the Dual Language Coordinator, the English Language Program teacher, the Case Manager, and teacher leaders would be trailblazers of team development as the ultimate force for high-quality instruction in each classroom (See Appendix D).

Rigor Walks (by the district), informal and formal classroom observations, and qualitative data from team meetings and reports became the source to learn about our growth as a professional learning community. The end-of-the-year student performance data (STAR 360 and Illinois Assessment Readiness) allowed us to measure the impact on students' learning.

## METHODS

Addressing the growth opportunities and sustaining our organization's strengths involved identifying change levers. This was a process with iterations over time.

I used concepts such as adaptive versus technical problems, psychological safety, effective feedback, the difference between climate and culture in the organization, and communication as a framework to inform my leadership moves. This process was not linear with a predictive set of steps. As part of the larger organization, we had to continually adapt to the district's requirements. Ultimately, this put me on the learning curve by pushing my strategic thinking to avoid confusion. I wanted to protect a climate in which staff did not feel conflicted with the district's priorities and priorities.

The chart below includes the main components of the strategic plan to establish a strong supportive instructional support system with a distributed leadership approach.



### Professional development

Throughout the school year, we collaborated with a dual language education consultant. This collaboration involved classroom observations and co-action plan development, followed by the engagement of the assistant principal, the dual language coordinator, and the dual language leadership team. This process involved the consultant facilitating the professional development of the teachers. The role of the dual language coordinator was going to be key to achieving our goals.

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is one of the district's initiatives. The MTSS Instructional Coach was the lead with the support of the assistant principal. They attended monthly district meetings that informed the MTSS system development at the school level. The MTSS Instructional Coach led MTSS meetings every other week and facilitated grade-level meetings. Also, she supported teachers in the classroom to plan and implement Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions along with the electronic documentation in a district platform.

The Instructional Leadership Team, which has been in place for many years, is an asset at Talcott. They have the role of team leaders and facilitators in professional development days. This is a group of educators committed to continuous improvement of the school organization.

The district-led ILT Institutes were an opportunity for the school's ILT assessment of their effectiveness in three aspects: culture, structure, and knowledge and skills.

ILTs focus on improving teaching and learning. The ILT helps to maintain a cohesive school vision and strategy focused on student learning.

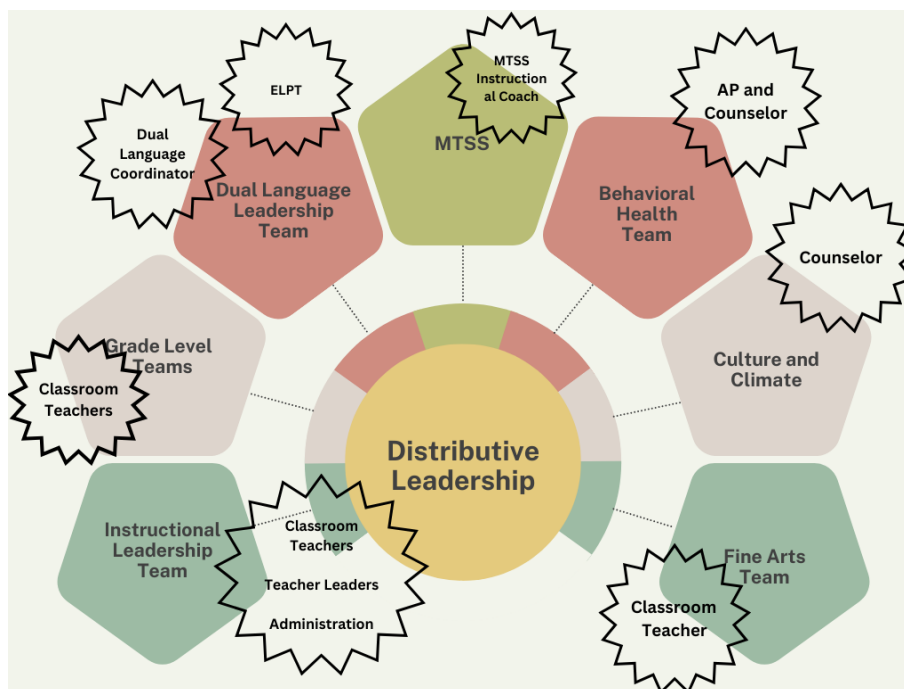
ILTs develop and monitor the performance and learning of both students and teachers. Together, the team analyzes trends and patterns of data from various sources to impact school conditions pertinent to growing the effectiveness of the instructional core.

ILTs support professional learning opportunities for all staff aligned to school goals and grounded in data.

ILTs understand that professional development (including but not limited to: whole-school PD, team-based learning, coaching, observations, and reflective conversations) must be consistent, connected, and prioritized as the work of the whole team.

### Team Development

Below, there is a chart that shows team development last school year.



Members of the ILT, including non-classroom teachers positions and teacher leaders, took a role as team leads in different teams. They led norm development, mindfulness activities, and agenda development. We made it a practice to discuss team performance and outcomes. This ongoing informal assessment did not occur only at the ILT level but with team leads and at the administrative level.

### Professional Learning Plan

The district provided a tool to plan learning cycles as part of the professional learning plan for the school year. We “struggled” to ensure that this plan reflected the district’s goals and the school’s goals. The district facilitated rigor walks that provided data to inform learning cycles regarding standards-aligned instruction.

### Individual Leadership Capacity

The assistant principal and I schedule regular check-ins with the MTSS Instructional Coach, Dual Language Coordinator, Case Manager, and English Language Program Teacher to 1) build a trusting relationship, 2) get updates on their work and collaborate with teachers, 3) provide feedback on their performance 4) offer support for their development.

We kept notes on these interactions with documented next steps. This structure allowed organization and objectivity.

### Accountability

During the first weeks of the school year, I immediately learned that accountability was needed to achieve our goals. It would be a smooth transition for all the teachers in non-classroom positions to get on with their roles and create an impact on instruction. As I mentioned, some staff members were thriving, and others were struggling. We had requested them to share their calendar and document their professional activities (technical problem). We had consistent check-ins identifying deliverables with a due date (technical problem). We facilitated sessions for the teacher leaders to reflect on their performance, identifying strengths and areas for improvement (adaptive problem).

## RESULTS

Reflecting on the outcomes at the end of the school year, I can identify some successes. First, in terms of student performance, the percentage of students in Tier 2 for MTSS decreased in reading. The MTSS team, under the leadership of the MTSS Instructional Coach, established the conditions for a solid Tier 1 instruction. The orchestration of Tier 2 interventions in reading resulted in systematically addressing the student’s needs. The MTSS Instructional Coach was invited to present to the Network (group of schools geographically organized). This coach



developed tremendously as an instructional leader. We talked to her about pursuing her administrative certification. She will start a doctoral program in urban leadership next year and participate in a leadership program with the Teach Plus organization.

The Instructional Leadership Team was the foundation for enhancing other teams such as the MTSS, Behavioral Health, Culture and Climate, and Dual Language Leadership.

The Case Manager became very comfortable managing the systems of students and individual specialized instruction plans (Special education). It was her first year in this role, and she ensured we were 100% in compliance with special education requirements. Also, she started facilitating a professional learning community with diverse learners specialists. The first goal was to create a sense of community among these educators, and the second goal was to learn together about co-teaching models. Talcott is a school that believes in inclusion for diverse learners when appropriate for their needs.

We must continue supporting the Dual Language Coordinator and English Learner Program Teacher in developing their leadership skills in the SY23-24. We learned that

As a result of the collaboration with the dual language consultant, language and content allocation were revised for our dual language model at Talcott. This revision was very important because it translated into curricular decisions for the SY23-24, along with a professional development plan. When I transitioned to a new role in the district, there was a plan in place that would be executed by Elva, who hopefully will be the new principal. I walked away with a sense of confidence and optimism for the future.

My last time with the Instructional Leadership Team was during a retreat on my last day as the principal at Talcott. Elva led this retreat. This was a positive result of the work in the SY22-23. Elva built a trusting relationship with the teacher leaders. To see Elva interacting with them and being a facilitator was evidence of a successful leadership succession plan.

The Illinois Assessment of Readiness results showed an improvement in student performance in reading and math compared to the SY21-22. Even though it was not an important positive difference, it is a win considering that the pandemic years impacted students' learning.

## REFLECTIONS and FUTURE PLANS

Participating in the Fellows Program allowed me to go through an introspective process. I reflected on my leadership capacity in assessments such as the NBI, Clifton Strengths, and communication styles. I became highly aware of my strengths and areas for improvement. It was so timely to have this professional experience. I am now in a new role in the district as the Deputy Chief of the Office of Language and Cultural Education. I am learning a lot, pushing myself to a different level of leadership that will make an impact at a larger scale.

I am working with different people and teams and continually think about transformational and transactional leadership. My communication style is red. I continually think about the limitations of this style because, in this role, it is critical that I demonstrate patience and acknowledge people. Protecting staff's psychological safety is important as well.

The opportunity to interact with leaders from throughout the country was invaluable. Learning about other contexts, communities, and ways to do things was so insightful. To see these colleagues a few times a year and listen to their ideas and reflections publicly was humbling. The Cahn Fellows created a space where we felt safe showing our vulnerability. One of my takeaways from this experience was ensuring a safe environment for the members of a community.

The Cahn Fellows was my last year as a principal. It is very significant. Elva was with me in this experience. She is now leading Talcott, and hopefully, her principal contract will happen soon.

This year was a preparation year for Elva, my former assistant principal, for what I call my succession plan. The Cahn Fellows program was an excellent professional development experience and an opportunity to have long discussions about our leadership, collective leadership, and our vision for the future. I invited Elva to define her leadership and to see herself as the future leader at Talcott. We developed a trusting relationship where we could sometimes have difficult conversations. I check myself to ensure that I provide opportunities for growth and space for her leadership. As I transitioned to a new role in the district, I knew Elva could lead the organization I had led for almost 15 years. She will develop more in the position dealing with technical and adaptive problems. In the life of an instructional leader, you grow when you are in the situation. Elva will grow rapidly as she faces the challenges of leading Talcott. I am very excited for her.

## ALLY REFLECTION

My experience with the Cahn Fellows gave me insights about leadership that allowed me to reflect on the type of leader I am now, what type of leader I would like to be, and the journey to get there. One thing I learned is the importance of having a balance of different personalities on your team, each with their own strengths and areas of growth that can be supported by others on the team with different personalities. Through the Personal Communication Styles Assessment by Exec|Comm, I learned that I am a “Gold” communicator. As a gold, I set a positive tone, uncover problems, and encourage discussion, but I am not direct enough and shy away from difficult feedback. Interestingly, Olimpia is a “Red” personality who is the direct opposite of me according to this tool. This exercise was insightful and allowed us to understand each other better and for me, work on adopting some of those beneficial characteristics and adapting to her and not taking things personal. There were instances in the office where we would both stop and say how “red” or “gold” the other one was being and we would get a good laugh out of it which, by the way, was a good way to decompress. The personality exercise also gave us an opportunity to understand the other leaders at our school and discuss ways of supporting them and each other without passing judgment.

Another area of learning was impacted by the Roadmap for Systems-Level Change and developing an inner capacity of being with Sarah Suatoni and David Yuan. While it helped me reflect on my inner strengths, I thought about how I could use these exercises to support my leadership team as well as my teachers. The field of education is extremely challenging in so many ways especially post-pandemic and tending to adult social and emotional well-being is an area that cannot be ignored. We live in a fast-paced world and schools are no exception. Hitting the pause button and taking a moment to breathe is critical for our physical and mental well-being. At our Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) retreat we did some of the mindfulness and reflective exercises from this session and all 11 team members were grateful for such reflective and grounding moments. These dedicated leaders felt appreciated, heard, and valued which is exactly how I felt attending the Cahn Fellowship conferences.

Throughout the 22-23 school year, the Cahn Fellowship provided me insight on not only how I can be a more effective leader, but how I can support Olimpia in building the capacity of our teacher leaders. She and I had great discussions about how to do that for each individual leader at Talcott and planned ways to support them by providing them

with opportunities to lead and determining what support they would need in order to be successful. What I found helpful was the Performance Feedback Outline that served as a very practical guide for providing feedback. All of these factors, I believe, allowed us to collaboratively build the capacity of two of the leaders who were struggling in their roles. Like all leaders, they have strengths and areas of growth and in order for them to be effective, we know that we have to model what that looks like as well. Through intentional distributed leadership they have been able to step into additional leadership opportunities. Olimpia did the same to me by giving me the task of running five simultaneous summer school programs. To be honest, when she told me that I would be in charge of those programs this summer, I felt like the wind got knocked out of me. I was shocked, but I was determined to make it happen. This was one of the biggest challenges I have had as a leader, so far, and I am grateful that she entrusted me with such a task because I learned so much about leadership, systems and structures, and grew in confidence. While it was a long summer, it was a concrete example of distributed leadership and a learning experience.

For me, attending the Cahn Fellowship as an Ally was extremely beneficial because I was able to hear research-based information related to leadership as well as to listen to other leaders share their challenges and celebrations. It was a privilege to hear from high functioning leaders from other parts of the nation including my own principal. Sometimes it feels that we live and work on an island with the illusion that no one else is going through what you are going through. Listening to other leaders reassured me that we are in this together. I also learned that I need to be more assertive and shut down the “imposter syndrome” that sneaks up on me very often. I have grown in confidence and yet still remain humble.

These were also invaluable moments with my Cahn Fellow, Olimpia, to share our definitions of leadership and assess the state of our systems and structures and get excited about ideas we wanted to implement when we returned to Talcott. I am positive that she and I would not have had such in depth conversations and grown as a team had it not been for the Fellowship. I could not have asked for a better way to engage in my first year at a new school. If it was possible for a team of leaders who are new to working together to receive this type of leadership experience, I would highly recommend it.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My year as a Cahn Fellow represented a critical year that prepared me for what would happen to me in my leadership journey.

I want to thank my family, who has always supported me. I am a learner and am always looking for opportunities to keep growing. This means that I am away from my husband and children. They love me and are my best cheerleaders.

My staff at Talcott has allowed me to grow in the last 18 years in different roles. Now that I am in a role at the district level, my memories as an instructional leader, the struggle, and the wins allow me to have a strong perspective on how I need to perform to make an impact at a larger scale.

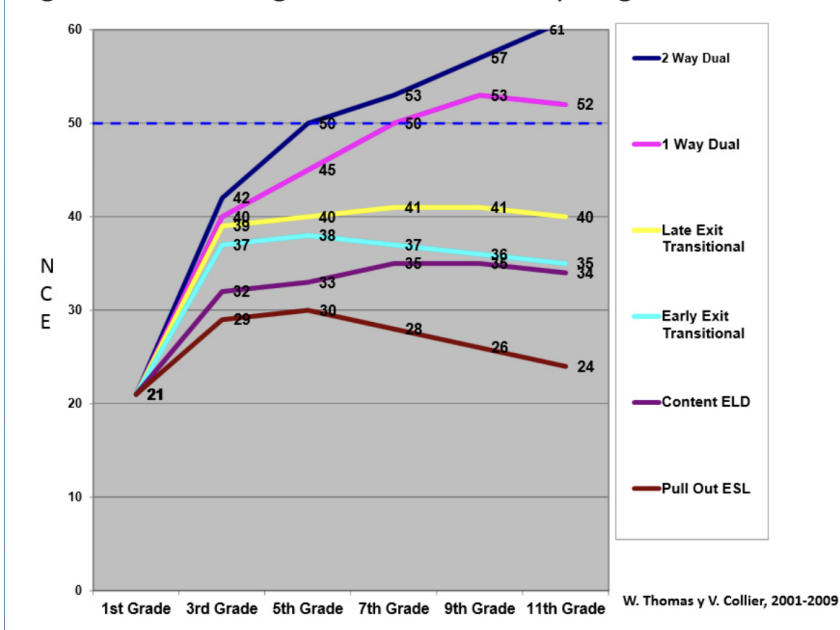
I thank my former assistant principal and the MTSS Instructional Coach, who were so engaged last year. To see them grow was such a joy. I felt so optimistic about the future of urban education with leaders like them.

I thank the Cahn Fellows for your support to leaders in the country. You understand the complexity of this role, and for one year full of learning, experiences, and professional interactions, we experience acknowledgment, respect, and pride.

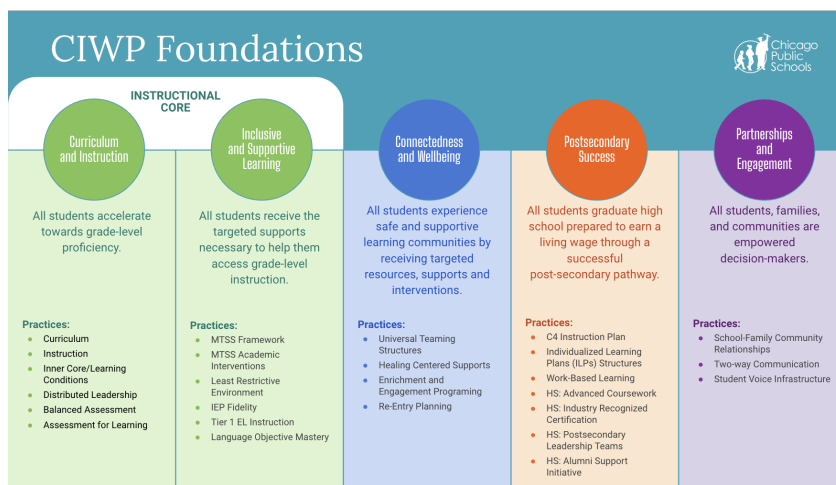
APPENDIX

Appendix A

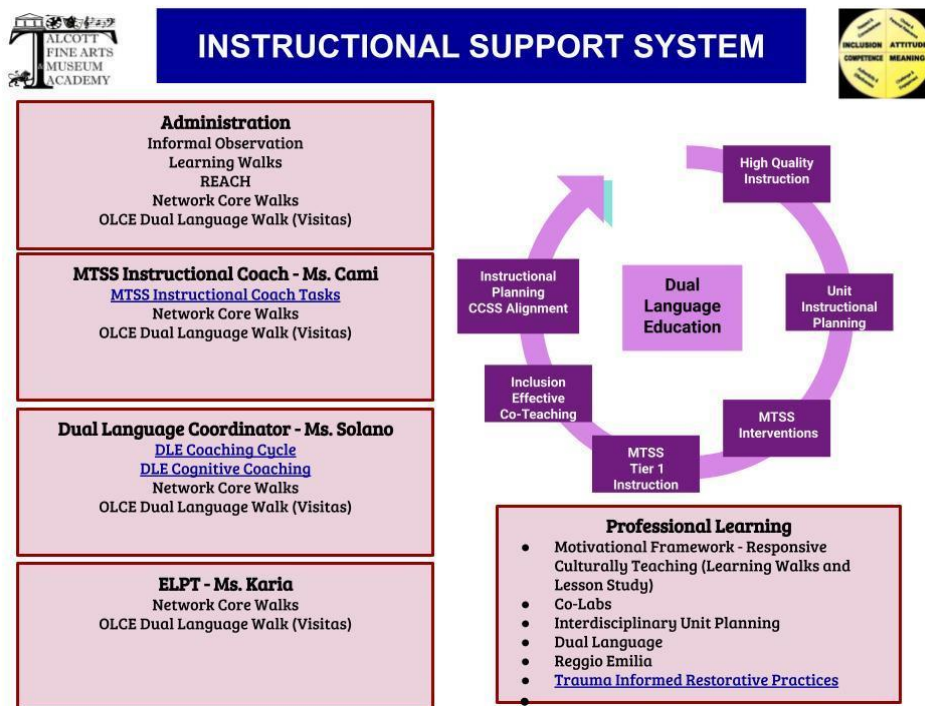
English Learners' Long-Term Achievement by Program Model



Appendix B



Appendix C



Appendix D

