



# Cahn

**DISTINGUISHED  
PRINCIPALS FELLOWSHIP**

## **Shifting Sands**

**Solidifying Staff Culture through Development, Strategic Input, & Distributive Leadership**

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2022-2023 Cahn Cohort

## ABSTRACT

Our Cahn Project is a focus on how important it is to have collective ownership and a strong development plan when it comes to building a strong and healthy team. We know and acknowledge that this is not a surprise to anyone, but in the years since coming out of the pandemic and in seeing a large shift in our staff makeup, we realized we had missed some opportunities to help our team to be more cohesive and to have stronger buy-in in getting the results our kids deserved. In many ways, we had created a staff that was waiting for its leadership to give it answers and a leadership team that wasn't cohesive enough to give them the answers they needed.

On the whole, our project really represents a missed opportunity to build a strong sense of team among a new, young staff that had lots of potential but not enough guidance to optimize its talent. There were a lot of factors that played into this - paternity leave early in the year from the Principal, decisions around staffing and shifting leaders to other campuses by our central office team, a few long term absences among the leadership team, and generally a lack of continuity and consistency.

Still, there was much learned from our dilemma that will continue to be applied at the school and has already led to strong results related to team health and cohesion early in this school year. You will see that naming the importance of better and more consistent development of our teammates, along with a better process for involving our team in decisions and owning the results of our work have been a large part of what the team at Montview is working on this year. While I am no longer the Principal there, I believe that much of the work we did to shift staff mindsets, to encourage folks to leave who weren't eager to be part of a strong team, and to recognize the need for strong work related to staff coaching and development has and will lead to an even brighter future at DSST Montview.

## INTRODUCTION

Our project was focused on the need to build a more collaborative and healthy team in the 2022-23 school year. In our project, we focused on hearing input from our team in a variety of ways and using that feedback to understand their concerns. The ultimate goal was to develop a better sense of distributive leadership and allow our whole team to feel a greater sense of collective ownership because their voice was heard and they had active opportunities to lead. Throughout this process, we also recognized there was a need for more formalized opportunities for our team to give input and share opinions on the direction of our school. While I believed and sought out opinions from others, our young leadership team and staff didn't always know how to go about giving that input. Therefore, part of our project was to

learn how to better mechanize opportunities for our team to collaborate. Finally, there was recognition that our leadership team was not as attuned at developing our staff as it needed to be. We worked to identify methods for development as we knew that supporting our team with its growth would lay the foundations for a stronger team.

## SCHOOL BACKGROUND

DSST Montview Middle School was the flagship middle school of the DSST (Denver School of Science and Technology) network. Our network is made up of eight campuses (8 middle schools and 8th high schools) in Denver and Aurora, Colorado. Montview is a school of about 470 students which includes nearly 150 students in 6th, 7th, and 8th grade and a Center Program for kids with Autism. We are a fairly diverse school community as represented with the following demographics:

- 67% of our students qualified for Free and Reduced Lunch
- 40% of our students identified as Latino, 30% as Black, 18% as White, 8% as mixed race, and about 4% Asian American
- About 12% of our student body were students with disabilities
- 30% of our students qualified as Multilingual Learners

DSST as a network has the following mission: DSST Public Schools transforms urban public education by eliminating educational inequity and preparing all students for success in college and the 21st century. It does this with a specific focus on the Core Values of Respect, Responsibility, Courage, Curiosity, Integrity, and Doing Your Best. Our network is known for running the top secondary schools in Denver specifically given its emphasis on serving low income and marginalized communities. To date, 100% of its graduating seniors at all of its campuses have been accepted to a 4 year college or university.

Montview Middle School has consistently been a top 10 middle school in Denver and has always been a green rated school by the Colorado Department of Education. It has a track record of strong results for its students, though in recent years the high growth and proficiency marks have started to drop. Still, it outperforms its peer schools often, despite serving a much larger number of marginalized communities.

We have a strong emphasis on a STEM education which includes a robust science curriculum. Our Creative Core classes include Creative Engineering, Film & Drama, Ceramics, and PE & Health. We have put many resources into our Creative Core classes specifically to ensure that they have a strong emphasis on technological and engineering skills. We still very much have a strong liberal arts curriculum with added focus on English Language Arts and Social Studies classes. We also worked to enhance our club offering last year which included anything

from Dungeons and Dragons to STEMBLazers. Our school has worked hard over the last few years to create more opportunities for our students both in terms of our course and club offerings.

Finally, it is worth noting that much of our staff is fairly new to teaching: over the past two years we hired 14 new teachers. Nearly 50% of our teaching team has 0-2 years of teaching experience. The staff is also nearly 80% white which stands in stark contrast to a student population that is over 80% non-white. While not a focal point of this paper, it is worth acknowledging that this discrepancy contributed in significant ways to the mindset of staff and the perceived issues they saw related to student culture in our community.

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Our school staff reported a fairly low feeling that they were part of a “healthy team”, that their opinions were not valued and taken into consideration, and that they did not feel valued for the work they were doing. (Or at a minimum many were reporting a “neutral” feeling on this.) While we were aware of these sentiments on our team, this was further validated from a survey given called our Network Pulse Survey (See Appendix A). In this survey the scores indicate the following:

- 5 = Strong Agree
- 4 = Agree
- 3 = Neutral
- 2 = Disagree
- 1 = Strongly Disagree

We believe that these feelings are leading to a lack of consistency both in culture expectations and delivery of instruction in many of our classes

As noted, Montview is the flagship campus of the DSST network and has been in existence as a Middle School for 15 years. As our network grew, our campus often had people leave to join new campuses or to take on new roles. At the same time, Montview did benefit from being the oldest campus and kept many experienced staff members. I rejoined the Middle School in 2020. The middle school had faced a tumultuous couple of years that included midyear leadership changes and an attempt to move to a full campus model with our high school, which ultimately was not successful. These challenges pre-dated the pandemic, which occurred shortly thereafter. Over the course of two years and iterations of online, hybrid, and in-person learning we made significant growth as a team, and while we faced many of the same

challenges of other public schools, there was a contingency of veteran teachers we used to build the health and strength of our team.

But between 2021 and 2022, many long time members of our team left, often because of life circumstances or they were simply tired from the work and pursued other passions. While we still had some veteran leaders we were a much younger and inexperienced team than we have been in the past. Here is a listing of the experience ranges we had on our team:

- 8+ year = 5
- 6-7 years = 3
- 3-5 years = 8
- 1-2 years = 7
- New (no experience) = 7
- Number of new TEACHERS to DSST Montview in last 2 years: 14

Additionally, of our seven leadership team members, 5 had been hired in the last two years with 4 of them being completely new to leadership. On top of this, I (John) went on paternity leave for about 5 weeks in October and November. The network also took a leader from our campus in late November to move to another campus, which contributed to another member of the leadership team quitting before Winter Break. The amount of movement and inconsistency our leadership team faced therefore made our development and support of staff more haphazard than we would have liked.

Our school-focused question became the following: *How can the utilization of distributive leadership and better processes for gathering staff input around school practices lead to better team morale and more consistency and execution on behalf of our students?*

Additionally, we had to answer this question as a leadership team: *How can our leadership team better focus its time and energy on connecting with staff in order to:*

- *Hone in on development and support*
- *Get input and ideas to drive team improvement and in order to make decisions*
- *Be public leaders displaying positive energy and optimism toward our staff*

In order to track progress on this goal we continued to use the Network Pulse Survey given by the network every two months. It is not lost on us that much of this is void of student achievement data, our biggest north star, but we felt that slipping data over the years has been the result of our lack of cohesion and collective buy-in as a staff. Starting with a strong sense of togetherness would lead to stronger student culture and from there will continue to ensure our academic outcomes are strong.

## METHODS

Starting in February our biggest goal was to know and understand the needs of our team. From November through mid-February, our leadership team was constantly undergoing change:

- Early November: John returned from paternity leave
- Thanksgiving: School Director in Training, who was leading on school culture, was moved to another campus by our Home Office team
- December: 8th grade Dean of Student quit on the heels of losing our SDiT
- January: Jessica Galarza, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, was out for over a month with a collarbone injury
- End of February: our Associate Director moved on from the job for personal reasons
- February: onboarded a new 8th grade Dean
- Intermittent throughout: Our 7th grade Dean was intermittently out on Paid Leave to support her family and other personal issues

We are noting all of this because it had a huge impact on the energy and time we were able to give to diving in deep with our teaching team. As a leader, I spent most of my time simply trying to manage the roles of many of our leaders who had been moved, left, or needed time for personal reasons. It had become apparent that our staff was feeling the inconsistency and dysfunction of our leadership team, and despite our best efforts to fill gaps, we were struggling to do so.

However, at the outset of Trimester 3 in late February we were finally able to lean into this work. We started by naming the current reality. We knew that our school staff was not as cohesive and connected as we wanted to be, and we knew that the feeling of team health was lower than needed to run a top performing school. We started by running a staff-wide Professional Development where we unpacked the data from our Network Pulse Survey and shared many of the comments our staff had provided. We also distributed a survey asking our staff what needed to happen for our school to have a stronger and healthier school team. This information was used in a follow up staff meeting which was held the very next day. We shared the results of that survey which included both celebrations and shout outs that teammates had given, along with very real and pointed concerns that were raised. In that meeting, we got into groups to brainstorm ways to solve some of the problems that were elevated. It was a healthy meeting and a good start to our work together. From there we continued with a series of Professional Development related to building a strong team. This provided us with a common vocabulary related to trust and healthy conflict that gave us the language we needed to discuss what it truly meant to be a healthy school team.

Additionally, members of our network team supported our campus by hosting a Listening Tour. The goal of the tour was to provide staff members a safe place to share feedback that would later be given to our Leadership Team. This allowed staff members to give answers to a third party without fear that there would be repercussions for sharing their honest opinions. The findings from this listening tour were shared with our leadership team and from there we crafted a plan of action to address the concerns that were brought up.

Ultimately, 54% of our staff took part in the listening tour. The results indicated that the team felt they had good relationships with colleagues and that all believed they and their teammates were doing the work for the right reasons. However, there were common concerns shared about consistent student culture and behavior problems, a lack of timely response and communication from our Leadership Team (often specifically tied to student culture), and a culture of gossip among the staff created by feelings of a void of communication.

We aimed to address these in several ways. First, we were already addressing some issues via the professional development we were taking part in at that time. Second, we implemented a strong communication loop with our Culture Team. Deans were expected to communicate daily any student concerns that had arisen and what the response to those concerns were. Third, I started hosting weekly office hours to provide staff members a chance to communicate with me directly. I was a very active principal who worked in hallways and classrooms, and was very visible and present to teachers. However, offering formal office hours was a mechanism we decided on that a few staff members took advantage of.

Fourth, we used this information to lean further into staff retention by identifying teacher leaders for the upcoming school year. This included identifying teachers who would be strong Department Chairs (content leads) and House Leaders (grade level culture leads). This was a process that led us into May, but ultimately we ended up with a very strong group of teacher leaders who we felt confident would help us to strengthen our team health in the coming school year. We also targeted one on one conversations with teammates who we wanted to keep on the team. Additionally, we were able to identify several team members who were not the right fit for our school, and we had strategic conversations with those staff members that resulted in their decisions to move on to other workplaces. While sometimes uncomfortable, we knew these targeted conversations would prove beneficial to the team in the year ahead.

Finally, as this year has started, the team has brought together its Teacher Leader Group each month. This team is composed of Department (Content) and House (Culture) teacher leaders and each month they come together to discuss a variety of items as a group. For instance, they take a look at staff pulse survey data alongside the Leadership Team. This brings them behind the curtain on how we are supporting staff, and they leave with action steps related to how they will support teammates. This creates shared ownership and puts less of the burden on the Leadership Team. This is also a spot to give these teacher leaders a line of sight

on things that are upcoming. For example, they recently looked at details related to the Interim Assessment schedule and were able to give input ahead of it going live to the entire staff. Most important, this allows key teacher leaders to have shared buy-in and responsibility for working toward building a strong and healthy team.

## RESULTS

There is certainly a lot of work that remains to be done and the work of building strong team health is ongoing. Still, the initial results have proven promising even as the next school year has started. Using the same network pulse survey we tracked a few questions to see how staff response changed from our survey in January to the most recent one at the start of September. Please remember that this is a 5 point scale with 5 being Strongly Agree and a 1 Strongly Disagree. Here are the questions and the average staff response by month of the survey:

- “At my school my opinion seems to matter.”
  - January = 3.61
  - March = 4.0 (+0.39)
  - **September = 3.9 (+0.38)**
- “I am on a healthy, high-performing team.”
  - January = 3.3
  - March = 3.5 (+0.2)
  - **September = 3.9 (+0.6)**
- “I feel seen and valued by my school for my work.”
  - January = 3.63
  - March = 3.7 (+0.07)
  - **September = 3.9 (+0.27)**

What is exciting about these results is that by simply starting the conversation in late February we saw an immediate jump in our results. This was further proof that people on our staff wanted to be on a healthy team and the simple act of discussing it made people already feel as though they were.



## REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE PLANS

We are proud of the work we did at the end of the year to focus on strengthening the health of our team while also setting the team up for improved health in the future. With a relatively young staff last year we should have done more to push a mindset not only about being on a healthy team, but of being accountable to all aspects of our role. This needed to start with our Leadership Team as we did not always align our work well or do enough to set expectations for how we acted with each other and showed responsibility. As the Principal, I was spending too much time dealing with absences and interpersonal conflict between people. From the start, I needed to do more to hold people accountable to the work so that our teachers were ultimately better developed to do their roles well.

While I have moved on, this work has remained critical for the current team at Montview. Part of this is natural as a new leader has had to establish their vision for staff culture and team expectations. However, much of it is due to the work of the Leadership Team that remained in place from last year. As noted above, the team has done more to use its teacher leaders to discuss team health and to push them to help own the results of the team so this doesn't only fall to the Leadership Team. This was a structure I had in place before and that connection between the full leadership team and all of the teacher leaders is a simple but effective way to open up lines of communication. Unfortunately, this went by the wayside last year. As can be seen by early team health results, this structure is already starting to pay dividends.

One last thing to note is the role that development and coach relationships also play in how people perceive the health of the team and school. While the project has not emphasized these questions as much, if you jump to Appendix B you will see several questions that refer to feeling developed. When these numbers are high we see a large correlation with metrics related to team health. Here are the questions we might consider and their results from March and September:

- “In an average week, I engaged in meaningful conversations about my development.”
  - March = 3.6
  - **September = 4.0 (+0.4)**
- “My manager is checking in with me regularly.”
  - March = 4.2
  - **September = 4.5 (+0.3)**
- “In the last month, I have had opportunities to learn and grow.”
  - March = 4.1
  - **September = 4.4 (+0.3)**

As people feel more positive about their growth and development due to the work they do with their manager, the more likely they are to feel competent and successful in their role. For this reason, we know that high levels of teacher development are also critical to building a healthy team and we will continue, as we have in the past, to focus on building the abilities and confidence of our leaders and our teachers.

Personally, as I have started a new role supporting school Assistant Principals at another charter network in Denver, Colorado, I have seen the impact of not only individual schools emphasizing support and development, but of a network that puts people on the ground floor doing side by side work with teammates. At DSST, this support was not as pronounced and our Leader Development Team led a handful of Professional Developments but rarely did side by side work with Assistant Principals let alone in lockstep with school Principals. It has been refreshing to be in a network where this has been the emphasis, and because of it we are seeing strong growth among our leaders, therefore giving them more confidence in their abilities as leaders.

#### FELLOW REFLECTION - JOHN CLARK

My Cahn experience has and will continue to shape me as a better leader going forward. I have been incredibly thankful for this opportunity not only because of new frameworks and paradigms it has taught me, but because of how it provided me with opportunities to step back and explore what I want out of leadership and who I am as a leader in this current moment. Ultimately that self-reflection allowed me to make a courageous and bold decision to step down from the leadership position I was in so that I could find an opportunity that was better for me and let the school continue to evolve under new leadership. Designing this research project led me to question whether I was right for the work that the school needed and whether the people supporting me were willing to help me to do that work. Ultimately, I am grateful to have moved to a place where I could support others better than I felt that I had been supported in my role.

The sessions with Dr. Brian Perkins were among the most influential that I had with the Cahn Fellowship and for where I was in my leadership journey. Whether it was exploring our personality traits, understanding more about how we communicated when conflict was involved, or understanding the role that culture played in our schools, Dr. Perkins helped me to further explore who I wanted to be as a leader. This in turn pushed me to ask if I felt like I could be that type of leader in the role I found myself in. Ultimately, I felt like I couldn't, and I have committed myself to finding work where I can be a support to others in ways that I did not always feel. I know I have a role in making myself into that leader as well but was thankful to Dr. Perkins for reminding me to find a place where I can lean into my strengths.

Ultimately, I'm grateful that Cahn gave me the chance to reflect and rejuvenate time

and again this year. Cahn allowed me to think about the big picture and to recognize what needed to happen for me as a leader to have the impact I wanted to have on kids and adults alike. I came away from each experience with Cahn feeling more confident as a leader and more convicted in my beliefs. While my job is no longer the same, I now sit in my new role supporting leaders at four campuses with much greater belief and determination than I have had in a long time. That is a direct result of my time with Cahn.

As for my Ally, Jessica Galarza, though our time in the program together was truncated I have seen in a short amount of time an increased understanding of what it means to lead a team and to develop individuals. She is certainly driving the work at DSST Montview now and is working with the current team to ensure that a shared connection among the leadership team leads to a stronger overall team health with a focus on teacher development. Our ability to discuss this project has allowed me to see how she has developed her ability to understand the root cause of the problem and, more importantly, to see her role in addressing that problem. For young leaders, this sort of thinking can often be a great challenge. Too often, we simply expect that people should change or behave as we do. However, people are dynamic and we have to understand them more deeply and then help them to change and grow through strong coaching and setting of high expectations. Jessica has certainly grown in this and it will carry her forward in the years to come.

#### ALLY REFLECTION - JESSICA GALARZA

Although I joined the Cahn Fellows program a bit later in the school year, I feel that the wealth of knowledge I gained has made an incredible impact on my leadership on my campus. During this program, I have realized that I am fully capable of being a school leader, and my aspirations of someday becoming a school principal have been affirmed. Surrounding myself at our workshops with inspiring leaders from around our nation has shown me that there is a wide network of leaders I will always be able to lean on for support and guidance, not only within the Denver community. The work that my Fellow and I completed this year has truly helped to change the climate and culture of our school community, and although John is no longer principal at our school, I have been able to continue the work that we started in bringing staff voice in the room where decisions are made. Seeing the mindset shift on our campus from our staff this year thus far has shown me that hearing and inviting staff to take on leadership roles within our school community is truly what can make a difference in the morale of staff as a whole. It excites me to see how the remainder of this school year will pan out due to the changes that have taken place to ensure multiple voices are heard. Our Teacher Leader cohort has been encouraged by the staff morale, and they can recognize that it is due to their work with their peers and not solely administrator decisions.

Thinking about how this program has changed me as a leader is exciting. After joining

this cohort with John, I have gained some new friendships and connections with other school leaders within the Denver community. I hope to be able to visit some of these campuses and see my peers in action with their work. My confidence in myself as a leader has grown through this experience. I came into this still having an “imposter syndrome” thinking I was not well equipped to be a school leader. However, through these invaluable experiences, I have learned that not only am I fully equipped to lead a school someday, I will also be able to bring new mindsets and ideas to the table. Being part of conversations with others has helped show me that the work is not done solo, but rather with a network of supporters and advisors. I know that my time working with John has come to an end, as he has moved on to a new position that brings him great joy, but I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity he provided me in joining this cohort. I look forward to being a forever alumni of the Cahn Fellowship Program, and I look forward to many years of friendship with John Clark and the other leaders I have met through this experience.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to provide immense gratitude to Dr. Barbara McKeon who allowed me to and supported me in finishing the program this year. Despite having to switch Allies midyear and needing to quit my job as a principal, she insisted that I continue with the work and reap the benefits of this program. I will forever appreciate her grace in allowing me to stay on and complete my Cahn journey. I will be a better leader because of this.

Finally, I want to thank the Denver Cahn Fellows who I had the privilege of getting to know this year. As a charter Principal, I was a bit of an outlier and my paths did not as readily cross with the other members of the Cahn Fellowship. However, they invited me in from the beginning and I was so excited to learn with and grow because of them. They were an exceptional group of people and I hope to keep our connection strong moving forward.

Appendix A - Network Midyear Pulse Survey

- 5 = Strong Agree
- 4 = Agree
- 3 = Neutral
- 2 = Disagree
- 1 = Strongly Disagree

Average			
Year	At my school, my opinions seem to matter. (If you are a HO team ...)	I am on a healthy, high-performing team.	I feel seen and valued by my school for my work. (If you are a HO ...)
2022-23	3.61	3.30	3.63

  

% Over Benchmark			
Year	At my school, my opinions seem to matter. (If you are a HO team ...)	I am on a healthy, high-performing team.	I feel seen and valued by my school for my work. (If you are a HO ...)
2022-23	56.5% N = 46	45.7% N = 46	58.7% N = 46

Distribution of Responses

## Appendix B - Network Pulse Survey Results March & September

### RESPONSE SUMMARY

Question Grouping	SubQuestion	Breakout 1	Breakout 2	Cycle	MTV MS
Location	At my school, my opinions seem to matter. (If you are a HO team member, please answer: "At the HO, my opinions seem to matter.")			3/6/2023	4.0
	I am on a healthy, high-performing team.			3/6/2023	3.5
	I feel seen and valued by my school for my work. (If you are a HO team member, please answer: "I feel seen and valued by the HO for my work.")			3/6/2023	3.7
	In an average week, I engage in meaningful conversations about my development.			3/6/2023	3.6
	In an average week, I receive praise and recognition for my work.			3/6/2023	3.7
	In the last month, I have had opportunities to learn and grow.			3/6/2023	4.1
	My manager is checking in with me regularly.			3/6/2023	4.2
	My manager seems to care about me as a person.			3/6/2023	4.5
Network	DSST is living its Core Values.			3/6/2023	3.6
	I feel seen and valued by the network for my work.			3/6/2023	3.7

### RESPONSE SUMMARY

Question Grouping	SubQuestion	Breakout 1	Breakout 2	Cycle	MTV MS
Location	At my school, my opinions seem to matter. (If you are a HO team member, please answer: "At the HO, my opinions seem to matter.")			9/12/2023	3.9
	I am on a healthy, high-performing team.			9/12/2023	3.9
	I feel seen and valued by my school for my work. (If you are a HO team member, please answer: "I feel seen and valued by the HO for my work.")			9/12/2023	3.9
	I know what is expected of me at work.			9/12/2023	4.2
	In an average week, I engage in meaningful conversations about my development.			9/12/2023	4.0
	In an average week, I receive praise and recognition for my work.			9/12/2023	3.7
	In the last month, I have had opportunities to learn and grow.			9/12/2023	4.4
	My coach regularly provides feedback and coaching that helps improve my instructional practice (If you are not a teacher, please answer: "My manager regularly provides feedback and coaching that			9/12/2023	4.2
	My manager is checking in with me regularly.			9/12/2023	4.5
	My manager seems to care about me as a person.			9/12/2023	4.6
Network	DSST is living its Core Values.			9/12/2023	3.9
	I feel seen and valued by the network for my work.			9/12/2023	3.6