

Reimagining Teacher Leadership
Cold Spring School

**Indianapolis Public Schools** 

This Case study was developed with special insights from the staff at Cold Spring.



This case study was co-produced as a special collaboration between Empower Schools and Teacher-Powered Schools.

Teacher-Powered Schools (TPS) is a project of the nonprofit organization Education Evolving. We believe school educators, those working closest to students, should co-design and make decisions impacting student success. Teacher-powered schools use shared leadership models to reimagine educator roles and create rigorous, relevant, student-centered learning environments. Our TPS team works directly with school and district teams through workshops, expert resources, and school partnerships facilitated by our TPS coaches who have been leaders at their own teacher-powered schools. We coach teams on shifting mindsets, establishing technical skills, and using proven practices to build the capacity of all teachers to be leaders without leaving the classroom. This model improves outcomes for students and educators. We engage districts, authorizers, unions, teacher prep providers, and policymakers to sustain K-12 systems where educators and students thrive.For more information, visit teacherpowered.org

Empower Schools is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization operating throughout the United States. Empower works with state agencies, policymakers, public school districts, institutions of higher education, and in partnership with communities across the United States in service of millions of students. Empower improves outcomes for urban and rural communities by developing sustainable systemic solutions at the school, district, and state levels.

Empower was founded in 2013 on the belief that partnering with communities to empower educators would lead to greater student success at school and in life. We support community partners in designing, launching, and sustaining innovative schools and school systems that help students achieve long term economic mobility. Empower works at the systems level to propose, develop, and transform state legislation and public policy, build community support, nurture systems-level leaders, and provide equitable K-12 and post-secondary opportunities for all students.

Empower's responsive approach is flexible and focused on the unique context and needs of each school community.

For more information, visit empowerschools.org.

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### Ways to Use this Case Study

#### Like a Short Story

Read all sections in order and consider the narrative of the teachers and community.

#### Like a Resource Bank

Bookmark this study to reference the interactive resources found throughout.

#### Like a Launchpad

Use the learnings found in this study to support your Professional Learning Community (PLC) and develop a plan for your school's reimagining.

### More to Learn

Go beyond reading to apply study takeaways to your learning community.



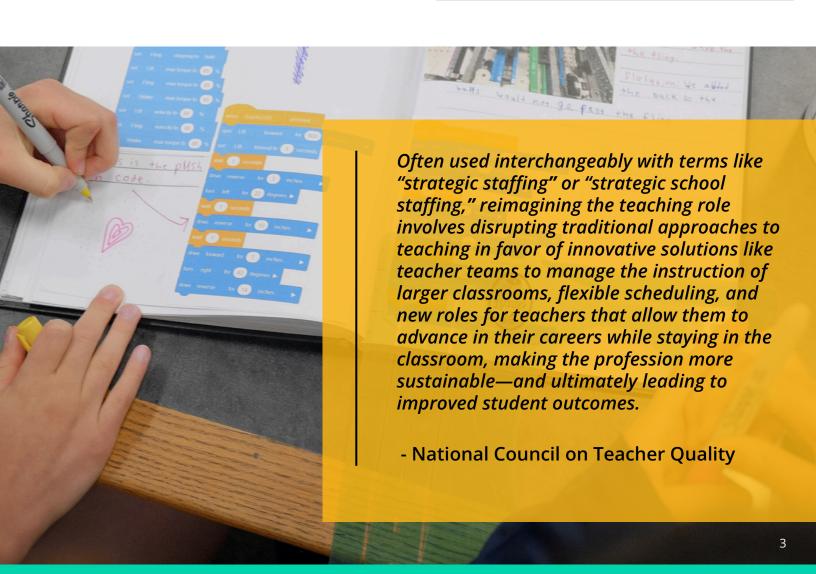
#### **Bright Ideas**

Tips and interactive resources you can click to dive deeper



#### **Get In Touch**

To get support implementing reimagining, reach out to us at empowerschools.org/contact



# **CASE STUDY SUMMARY**

### **Reimagining in Practice**



A Clear Standard of Excellence

# Creating a culture of high expectations through intentional hiring and collaborative accountability

- Strategic hiring practices ensure alignment with school vision from day one
  - Candidates receive and agree to Cold Spring Beliefs, Cold Spring Philosophy, and Instructional Excellence Standards before ever stepping foot in front of students
- Professional Learning Communities drive datainformed instruction
  - Twice-weekly PLCs (math and reading) for analyzing student performance and planning next steps
  - Teacher collaboration to evaluate strategy effectiveness and adjust teaching methods
- Teacher-led accountability culture
  - Teachers' shared commitment to high expectations and student success creates a culture of individual and shared accountability aligned with administrative standards

### **Reimagining in Policy**

- IC 20-25.7-4 establishes Indiana's Innovation Network School law, allowing schools with special agreements with the board to operate with flexibility while remaining part of the district
- The formalized agreement is between Indianapolis Public School district and a local nonprofit organization created to govern the Cold Spring School
- The agreement clarifies Cold Spring School's operational autonomy and outlines district-provided services



### **Evidence of Impact**

### **A Place Teachers Stay and Students Thrive**

### **Outstanding Teacher Retention**



80%

+15<sub>pts</sub>

or higher staff retention rate consistently over the last seven years

difference in teacher retention compared to the district

#### **Transformational Student Outcomes**

Students consistently outperform their peers at the district and state

Students report feeling valued and deeply supported by the dedicated staff



# **HOW TO REIMAGINE**

### The Teacher Role

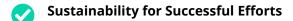
### **How Innovation Unlocks Teacher Power**

District public schools can be Innovation Schools – places where teachers, students, and community stakeholders are sustainably empowered to create the best school for the local community while preparing students to thrive academically, personally, and in their future careers.

To enable Reimagining in Practice that offer teachers fulfilling careers in schools that are great places for both students and educators, education leaders should work to ensure:



Broad flexibility to enact change is key, and this flexibility should be clearly defined and allow for continuous improvement



School districts and other stakeholders should ensure that successful remaginings can continue as long as they are meeting ambitious goals

### **Types of Innovation Schools**

Learning communities can decide to take on innovation for a variety of reasons. Those reasons shape the type of reimaginings that would be most critical and effective.

Turnaround Schools

#### Daries de decembre

Designed to dramatically improve performance.

#### **Innovative Model Schools**

Designed to implement a coherent school model, whether time-tested (e.g., dual language, Montessori, IB) or newly designed



#### **Aligned Policy and Resources**

Districts, state education agencies, and other stakeholders create space for innovation and enable flexibility in how teachers work together, interact with students, and act as leaders



#### **Shared Accountability**

Innovative reimagining of the role of the teacher is a powerful tool but must work in service of improved outcomes



### **Enabling Conditions**

States, education agencies, and school boards have varying policies that enable reimagining throughout the country.

Read more about enabling conditions and protections that exists here.



#### **Pathways Schools**

Designed to give students unique exploration and training opportunities in specialized fields.



#### **Community Schools**

Designed to act as a hub and meet holistic student and family needs.



### **ALIGNMENT ISN'T OPTIONAL**

Cold Spring School in Indianapolis is a K–8 innovation school with a unique focus on environmental studies and place-based learning. The school's instructional model emphasizes hands-on, experiential learning that connects students to the natural world.

Cold Spring School became one of the first Innovation Network Schools in Indianapolis in 2016, part of a group of district schools granted greater autonomy over staffing, budget, and curriculum through partnerships with nonprofit operators. This status enabled the schools to align their resources and decisions around a shared vision for student success, school culture, and approach to teaching and learning, including a STEM- and environmental science-focused experience for all students, and to fully leverage their longstanding partnership with Marian University through colocation.

As Cody Stripes, Chief Executive Officer, describes the school's deliberations, transformation became even more compelling when leadership "saw the writing on the wall" regarding the future of education. They envisioned adding a groundbreaking STEM and environmental science component that would set their students apart, but knew that "going through a traditional district to make that shift" would create difficult obstacles. The Innovation Network model offered them the freedom to act swiftly on their educational vision.

"That's what's so powerful about the innovation model," noted Stripes, "we have our own separate board, our own separate organization that's pure sole focus is what's best for the students and families and staff at Cold Spring School."

After receiving STEM certification from the Indiana Department of Education in 2019, the school—governed by Cold Spring School, Inc., a nonprofit organization with an appointed board of directors—continues to pursue its mission to create a learning environment that develops students' natural curiosity in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics while helping students acquire 21st century skills to become global citizens and stewards of the environment.

Today, this bold move has transformed Cold Spring into something extraordinary. With their autonomy, Stripes says his team members feel confident telling prospective staff members, "hey, you come to Cold Spring, this is what we're about. We're about inspiring a passion for STEM and the environment." The staff's commitment runs so deep that they present their nine core beliefs to every potential hire, making it clear that alignment isn't optional—it's essential. This unwavering dedication ensures that every decision, every hire, and every program serves one purpose: giving students the innovative, environmentally-focused education they deserve.

### A NEED FOR REIMAGINING

The decision to become an Innovation Network School wasn't made lightly at Cold Spring School, but it was driven by an unwavering commitment to the school's students. As leadership reflected on their journey, one administrator explained their motivation: "One of the biggest reasons...our desire to make that conversion is we wanted to be able to do what was best for our kids at this site. When you're working within a large district serving 60 schools and 30,000 students, district-level decision-making naturally needs to balance system-wide considerations, which can sometimes differ from what might be optimal for an individual site." Leadership recognized that while the district served many schools well, Cold Spring's unique vision required a different path—one that would allow the school to focus exclusively on the needs of its community.



#### Addressing the Need

After some deliberation and community feedback, Cold Spring School staff members determined that the most urgent needs could be summarized as:

- Autonomy to serve their specific student population- Freedom from district-wide policies that didn't align with what was best for their individual site and community
- Ability to implement innovative STEM and environmental science curriculum-Avoiding the "red tape" of traditional district approval processes to quickly add their unique educational focus
- Stable governance structure- Protection from political changes and turnover that could disrupt their long-term vision and programming
- Focused hiring and staff alignment-Ensuring all educators were fully committed to their specific mission and nine core beliefs rather than generic district standards
- Preservation of their partnership with Marian University- Maintaining and expanding their collaborative relationship without district interference or competing priorities



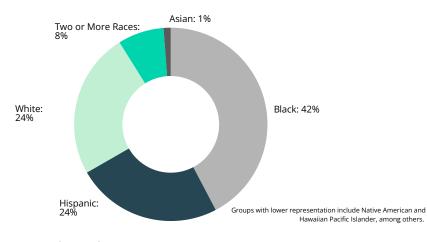
This innovation school was primarily created as an Innovative Model School.

### **About Cold Spring School**

Campus Demographics | School Year 2025-2026

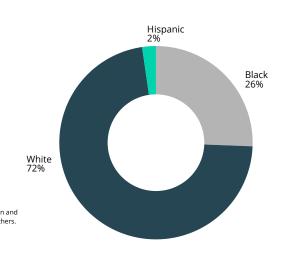
### **Student Demographics**

### Race and Ethnicity

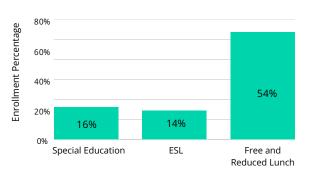


#### **Teacher Demographics**

### Race and Ethnicity



### **Special Populations**



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Average years of teaching experience

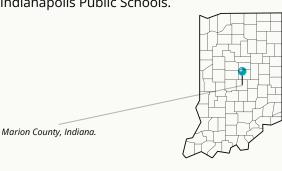


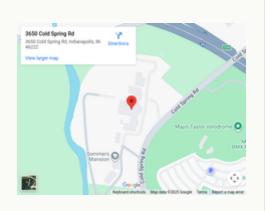
To learn more about Cold Spring School, see <u>GPS Benchmarked</u> Headline Indicators.



### **Exploring the Context**

Cold Spring School is on the northwest side of the Indianapolis, located on the campus of Marian University. Cold Spring is part of Indianapolis Public Schools.





View the map to virtually explore about the Cold Spring community.

### WHEN TEACHING BECOMES A SACRED TRUST



In the hallways of Cold Spring School something remarkable is happening. Teachers move with purpose, not because they're being watched or micromanaged, but because they've chosen to be part of something bigger than themselves. This isn't a story about revolutionary technology or groundbreaking curriculum—it's about what happens when a school creates a culture where educators hold themselves accountable to one simple question: "What's best for kids?"

The transformation didn't happen overnight. Nine years ago, the leadership team made a decision that would fundamentally reshape how they operated: the school's conversion to a STEM- and environmental science-focused Innovation Network School. Instead of hoping new hires would somehow absorb the school's values through osmosis, they began requiring every potential teacher to engage with their philosophy before stepping foot in a classroom. Every candidate watches the same video, reviews the same mission statement, and answers the same crucial question: "Are you willing to do these things?"

"They show them the video, like, we actually do these things. Are you willing to do these things?" explains David Petty, a veteran environmental science teacher. "So you know what you're getting to when you come on... I think they've done a better job of setting the reality of the school."

This clarity of purpose has created something extraordinary—a faculty that polices itself not through fear or competition, but through shared commitment. Teachers here don't wait for permission to slow down when students need more time and they don't follow rigid timelines that ignore the human beings in front of them.

Instead, they operate from a place of profound professional trust with the backstop of accountability for student outcomes. "It allows for the teachers to go we are not ready to move on as opposed to the district saying that we are going to be here by Friday," shares computer science teacher Genevieve McLeish-Petty.

But perhaps most powerfully, these teachers see their work as deeply personal.

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"I want to be the person that I needed," one teacher reflects, capturing the heart of what drives this community. "It's more of teachers just being willing to invest and make this what they would want for themselves as a child or for their own children."

-KELLY HOWARD, 4<sup>TH</sup> GRADE TEACHER

### HOW COLD SPRING SCHOOL IS REIMAGINING TEACHING

Cold Spring is the story of a school where accountability isn't imposed from above—it's embraced from within. Teachers don't ask "What does the district require?" but rather "What do these children need?" The hiring process isn't about finding people who can follow rules, but finding people who will help write new ones in service of something that matters more than any mandate: the flourishing of every child who walks through their doors.

### **5 Reimaginings at Cold Spring School**

1 Budget Flexibility



**3** Curriculum and Course Offerings



Teacher-Led
Accountability
Culture



Professional Development Plan



4 Strategic Hiring Practices



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### **Accountability Matters**



Cold Spring School makes it easy for families to keep account of school performance by maintaining an accountability dashboard under the Family Resources hub on the school website.

See the school's latest School Performance Report **here**.

### **Deep Dive | 5 Reimaginings Explained**

1



### **Budget Flexibility**

**Innovation:** Flexibility allows for strategic investment in technology and human capital

- Reduction of administrative and support role expenses allowed reallocation of resources.
- The school was able to invest in priorities, including:
  - 3-D printers
  - Computer aided design software,
  - Robotics team materials
  - o Other specialized tech as teachers see fit
- Specialized teachers for innovative, nontraditional courses (e.g., Fabrication in Computer Science, Environmental Science, Coding & Controlling). The school has supported staff retention and satisfaction by providing annual salary increases for all teachers.

# 2



### Professional Development Plan

**Innovation:** Emphasis on customized PD in and out of the school building

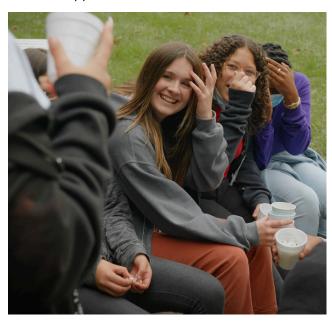
- Professional Learning Communities serve as the cornerstone of continuous educational improvement.
- Teachers gather twice weekly to dive deep into student data analysis and collaborate on refining instructional strategies that address areas needing enhancement.
   Regular meetings focus on both reading and math.
- Educators are empowered to pursue nontraditional professional development opportunities. They attend specialized conferences that focus on cutting-edge fields like computer science and artificial intelligence.
- Teachers remain at the forefront of emerging technologies and innovative teaching practices.



### **Curriculum and Course Offerings**

**Innovation:** STEM-focused, high-quality curriculum shapes the school's academic program

- Students participate in diverse courses and electives that capitalize on unique opportunities for nature engagement and outdoor learning across the school's expansive 39-acre campus, with teachers actively encouraged to maximize these environmental learning opportunities through outdoor instruction.
- All teachers receive Project Lead The Way training and certifications, enabling them to implement high-quality curriculum directly within their homeroom classrooms using top-tier instructional materials.
- The school's signature experiential learning initiative features three annual Partners in Environment (PIE) days, during which students rotate through dynamic learning stations staffed by volunteer experts, providing authentic opportunities to explore STEM careers while learning directly from professionals who apply this knowledge in their daily work, bridging the gap between academic theory and realworld application.





### Strategic Hiring Practices

**Innovation:** A focus on alignment to the school's mission and instructional approach.

- Cold Spring School's Innovation Network School status enables the school to attract teachers who demonstrate deep cultural alignment with the school's mission and educational philosophy.
- The hiring process strategically prioritizes candidates who will actively uphold and advance the school's core beliefs and standards for instructional excellence, ensuring that each new educator becomes an integral part of realizing the school's innovative vision.
- This deliberate focus on cultural fit creates a cohesive educational environment where teachers work in harmony to implement the school's distinctive approach to learning.

## 5

## Teacher-Led Accountability Culture

**Innovation:** Shared responsibility and pride in the work being done at the school.

- While teachers receive regular evaluations from administrators, it is primarily teachers themselves who ensure excellence in practice.
- Teachers hold themselves and each other accountable to high standards in all areas.
- One area in which an expansive view of teaching and positive peer pressure combine to lead to better practice is family communication. It's understood as a key part of every teacher's work:
  - Parents receive weekly academic progress notifications
  - All teachers contact families or guardians monthly through phone calls or in-person meetings
  - Each staff member plans and organizes at least two annual family engagement events



### **HOW POLICY ENABLED THESE REIMAGININGS**

#### Innovation Network School Status

 Cold Spring School was established as an Innovation Network School in 2016 and is operated by an independent nonprofit organization

#### What Innovation Network Schools Are

- They are part of the district's portfolio but operate with significantly greater flexibility than traditional public schools
- This a hybrid approach maintaining public school funding and accountability while granting meaningful operational independence
- There are five types of Innovation Network Schools
  - New school launch: A new school that opens in partnership with IPS facilities and shared services.
  - Charter as a new partner: A charter school, either new or existing, within the IPS boundaries, may enter
    into a partnership with IPS via an Innovation Network Agreement. This allows access to shared services
    such as food service, transportation, and professional development, and provides the ability to create a
    proximity boundary for enrollment.
  - Restart: A partner applies to restart a chronically underperforming school that has been recommended for this intervention by district leadership.
  - Conversion: An existing IPS school that shows outstanding leadership and team capacity may apply to convert their school.
  - Jumpstart: An existing IPS school in need of intervention due to student outcomes may convert to an Innovation Network School based on the will of the school community and building leadership as a selfinitiated improvement strategy.

#### How Innovation Network Schools Were Established

- Launched starting in 2014 through partnership between The Mind Trust, the Mayor's Office of Education Innovation, and Indianapolis Public Schools
- Their foundation traces back to 2006 when former Indianapolis Mayor Bart Peterson and David Harris founded The Mind Trust
- Over 20 Innovation Network Schools exist within the IPS district

#### Flexibilities Afforded to Innovation Network Schools

- Ability to opt in or out of district services (e.g.,food services, custodial, IT); teachers employed by 501(c)3 corporation, not district employees
- Full operational autonomy while remaining part of district with continued per-pupil funding
- Flexibility to choose own curricula, hire/manage staff independently, control budgets, set schedules/calendars
- Right to implement unique educational approaches while maintaining accountability through district oversight



#### **See the Agreement**

Review the <u>agreement</u> to understand how these policies were codified.



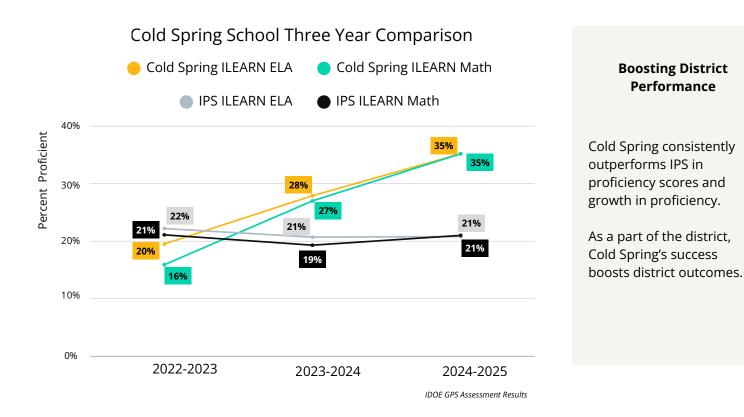
#### **Get Support**

Empower Schools supports Innovation Schools in creating durable agreements. Contact us to get advice and receive a sample MOU.

### PROMISING RESULTS

High expectations for teachers create a ripple effect that elevates student achievement.

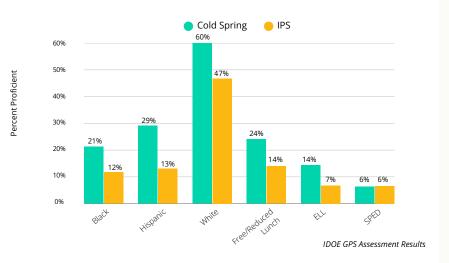
Over the last three years, Cold Spring's ILEARN ELA mastery increased 15.7 percentage points, which makes it the 38th highest increase in the entire state of Indiana. Out of 1700+ schools, Cold Spring was in the 97th percentile. Cold Spring's ILEARN Math Mastery increase of 19 percentage points is the 26th-highest in the entire state of Indiana and ranked in the 98th percentile.



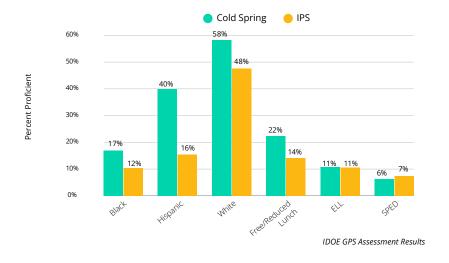
I think our school offers a lot of opportunities that other schools don't have. Our school is really small, which is actually good because students can connect more with the teachers, and the staff knows all the students instead of it being a huge school where nobody knows anyone. We also get to do a lot of hands-on stuff like robotics, and we go outside and take hikes and things like that.

-7<sup>™</sup> GRADE STUDENT

#### 2024-2025 ILEARN ELA by Subgroups



#### 2024-2025 IREAD MATH by Subgroups



#### **Learning for Every Student**

Cold Spring continues to outperform IPS averages when student results are disaggregated by subgroups. Additionally, students consistently outperformed state peers in ELA and math when disaggregated by ethnicity.

The small class sizes and specialized approach helps the school focus on differentiated learning, allowing for individual students to thrive.

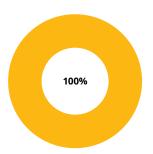
As one student reflects on Cold Spring's individualized approach to instruction:

My teachers know me well and understand my strengths, which helps them build my confidence in schoolwork. Even when I'm ready to give up, they encourage me to keep going because they believe in my abilities.

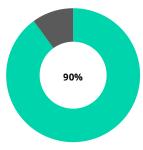
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### **Transformative Teacher Outcomes**

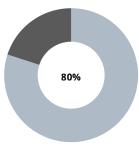
#### **Teacher Satisfaction Survey Data**



of their teachers feel that teachers are trusted to teach in the way they think is best.



of teachers feel that the working environment at Cold Spring School is positive.



of teachers feel like their colleagues' attitudes are positive.

#### **Teacher Retention**

The most recent teacher retention rates reflect positive teacher sentiments captured in the Teacher Satisfaction Survey:

- SY 2022-23-85%
- SY 2023-24- 93%
- SY 2024-25-91%

This is in comparison to IPS, which reported 78% retention in 2024.

IDOE School Staff EPP Report

### **MAKE IT YOUR OWN**

Questions and Activities to practice to apply the reimgainings found in this study.

### **Strategic Hiring and Onboarding Practices**

- How do we ensure candidates understand and commit to our non-negotiable expectations before they begin teaching?
- What systems do we have in place to communicate our beliefs, philosophy, and standards during the hiring process?

### **Teacher Decision-Making Authority and Collaborative Structures**

- What level of flexibility do teachers have in making instructional decisions based on data and student needs?
- How do we create regular, meaningful opportunities for teachers to collaborate and hold each other accountable to shared standards?

### **Shared Vision of Student Success and Experience**

- Do all stakeholders have a clear, consistent understanding of what excellence looks like for every student?
- How do we ensure our vision of the ideal student experience drives daily decisions and practices across all classrooms?





