# The Journey to Becoming an Instructional Leader

Through interviews with several principals, OLAC learned about educators’ journeys from the classroom to work as instructional leaders. Some of the stories are reported in an OLAC podcast. Kevin Jones’ story is reported here.

Kevin Jones’ journey took him from a high school classroom to the principalship at Winton Woods Elementary School in the Winton Woods City School District. Working in the classroom as a Spanish teacher, Jones felt frustrated by the limited scope of the changes he could make. He saw a building-wide role as providing more scope. His move into the role of guidance counselor at the high school provided a wider view. It also allowed him to use his own bilingualism as a basis for offering support to English learners. This strategy was something Jones could use at the elementary school as well, where 25% of the students are Hispanic. These experiences helped Jones begin to understand education from a systems perspective.

As his next step in the instructional leadership journey, Jones established the Academy of Global Studies at the high school—an experience that gave him an opportunity to work on curriculum development and learn more about instructional methods. “I saw how structures can empower or limit people in schools,” he commented. And he decided to that he wanted to be able to effect change in the structures and systems of schools for the better. “I went from the dance floor to the balcony and was able to see how things were happening at the whole-school level—that really led me to pursue my administrator’s degree.”

Jones soon moved into the assistant principal role at his high school. “Being able to get in there and be someone in a leadership role who could really listen and converse with Hispanic students and families seemed like an important thing, and a good thing.” But he also noticed that some of his students, especially the English learners, were arriving at the high school already feeling defeated by their experiences with school, especially with literacy instruction. So, he thought, “Well, if we can get to them before they get to high school, and help them have great reading experiences and help them to become self-guided learners, so that when they get to high school they are engaged and successful and want to learn, I want to do that. I want to help build a culture.” So when a principal position came open at the primary school, Jones went for it.

Jones sees his classroom teaching experience as being incredibly important to his role as an instructional leader.

Instruction in the classroom is the first line in and the most important part of school and school improvement. It let me really understand how to work with students and standards and formative assessments to see which students had reached mastery and could look at a topic more in-depth, and which students needed some more differentiated small-group instruction to get there.

Jones’s classroom experience is valuable to him as a principal, but he also found that moving from a high school to an elementary school left him with a lot to learn. He credits his school’s instructional coaches with helping him fill the gaps in his knowledge. He also credits a wider culture of shared learning at the school. It’s a culture where everyone is both learning and leading. “I have to be willing to learn from people, and I have to be willing to help them learn, not by talking at them, but by modeling the model,” he says. As a new primary school principal, Jones also participated in the OLi4 program, so he worked with both a coach and cohort of other principals to learn about shared leadership and instructional improvement. It was helpful to be able to go through the “critical friends” process and to share his challenges and learn from other principals.

According to Jones, the concept of shared leadership extends beyond the teachers—Winton Woods has a student leadership team as well. Even though the students are young, Jones said,

We ask them and talk to them about what they want from their education, and what they see and feel about what is going on in the school. And I think it is just really important…. We want everyone in on this culture, we want everyone to have an active part in what goes on here and what the education is at this school.

One of the responsibilities of an instructional leader is to create a safe environment—where everyone feels free to ask questions, share ideas, and learn from one another. It’s important, too, according to Jones, for the instructional leader to organize and facilitate opportunities that make collegial conversation and decision-making happen all the time. To support this kind of team work, instructional leaders need to keep track of teacher’s professional development needs and create structures that encourage teachers to collaborate and share leadership.

At Jones’s school, efforts to promote shared leadership have included work to organize and support a process allowing teachers to observe one another in the classroom. Any teacher can sign up in advance to observe one of his or her colleagues, and the school provides a substitute teacher. Then the two teachers meet up later and talk about what was observed.

The teachers also have grade-level common planning time once a week. “They plan their projects for project-based learning, and they look at student work, and talk about growth data, and what’s working and what isn’t, and what needs to come next,” Jones explained. The teachers provide Jones with an agenda of what they’re covering so that he can see what they’re focusing on and stay involved.

The school bases instructional improvement work in TBT and BLT meetings on a data-driven determination of what’s working and what isn’t. “Teachers go in with their data and talk about what growth they’ve seen and what areas still need work. They share ideas about what has worked for them and what hasn’t and how they can help each other.” As Jones noted, “if something doesn’t work, that has to be ok. Teachers need to be able to take risks and then be prepared to change things that don’t end up working.”

Jones also believes that it’s important to focus on and celebrate what is working. Once you identify success, then you can identify what contributed to it and try to reproduce it. Jones commented,

I think it’s so easy in our job, in our field, to always focus on “What are we improving next?” and on deficiencies. And I think, of course, that’s part of the ongoing improvement, but you can’t let the bright spots get lost; you have to be able to show and celebrate, and to learn from and replicate the improvements and the special moments that have really worked.

Instructional leadership for Jones involves work to establish effective structures for collaboration and improvement and also to build leadership capacity widely among the school’s educators. Doing so requires him to share leadership with others in the building. To become a leader of an entire staff of leaders, you have to be willing to learn from others, Jones noted.

You have to seek out and encourage and allow people’s strengths to be a part of the process. You not only get more buy-in that way, but you get so much more perspective, and it is just a much better process when you can do that. You have to build up the strengths of your teachers and help them see that they are leaders…and listen to them.