



DECEMBER 2017

Matthew Condon

SIXTH GRADE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS
DIRECTOR OF TEACHING AND LEARNING
COLLINS MIDDLE SCHOOL
SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS



Meet Matthew Condon

SCHOOL: Collins Middle School, Salem, MA

YEARS TEACHING: 11

PRIMARY SUBJECT: Sixth grade English language arts, (until June 2016); currently serves as director of teaching and learning

ROLES HE PLAYS AS A TEACHER LEADER: Leads the weekly sixth grade ELA team meetings, coaches five teachers, leads and designs professional development for his peers, and observes at least one classroom each day

GO-TO WEBSITE: www.achievethecore.org

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Matthew Condon's definition of teacher leadership has expanded greatly throughout his career, but one variable has remained consistent: You can't do the job sitting still.

Condon, 39, lives by that rule every day. He teaches sixth grade English Language Arts (ELA) at Collins Middle School in Salem, but that's only the start of his actual job. In addition to teaching two 90-minute classes each day, he leads the school's weekly sixth grade ELA team meetings, coaches

five teachers, leads and designs professional development for his peers, and observes at least one classroom each day.

Thin, with short-cropped hair and an infectious smile, Condon is constantly on the move. Juggling his multiple responsibilities requires him to move around in the classroom and often move from one room to another. Even his breaks are a blur: he eats his lunch standing in the hallway, giving students high fives between bites of his sandwich. His pace never slows from the first bell to the last, and when someone – student, teacher, administrator or parent—needs him, he's there.

"We are all in this to make Collins a better school for our scholars," he said, using the term all of the adults in the building use to refer to their students. "And there's always more time in the day for that."

A district-wide commitment to teacher leadership

Condon is one of just five designated "teacher leaders" at Collins, a school that just a few years ago was considered one of the lowest performing in this urban city. Today the school of nearly 550 students is virtually unrecognizable, from its leadership to the schedule. Perhaps most notably the school now has an extended day schedule, which allows for an additional 300 hours of learning each year. This allows students to have 90-minute blocks of ELA and math daily, in addition to access to extra-curricular activities ranging from theater to music to the Math League.

For teachers, this extended schools means more time in their schedule to collaborate, and support one another. Collins teachers have weekly grade level team meetings led by one of the school's five teacher leaders; twice weekly content-specific common planning time meetings; and weekly team meetings to discuss individual students' social and emotional needs.

These regular touch points and opportunities to collaborate and learn from one another are key to the new Collins approach to teacher development and student instruction, said Glenn Burns, Collins Principal since 2015. Working with the district leadership and his team, Burns has created opportunities for teachers to serve as and benefit from instructional and academic coaches, serve on the school's Data and Instructional Leadership teams, and pitch innovative, new ideas that enable them to pursue their passions. A former teacher leader himself, Burns says he recognizes both his own limitations and the vast, often untapped, potential in his team of educators.

"As a leader it's up to me to create a school where there is excellence in every component, but these aren't all things I can do myself," he said. "You can't just put more hats on people, but when you give them the time and space they need to tap into

the things they're passionate about, it makes a big difference."

Superintendent Margarita Ruiz, also a former teacher leader, agrees. Establishing leadership pathways and roles for teachers districtwide has been one of her top priorities since she came to Salem in 2015.

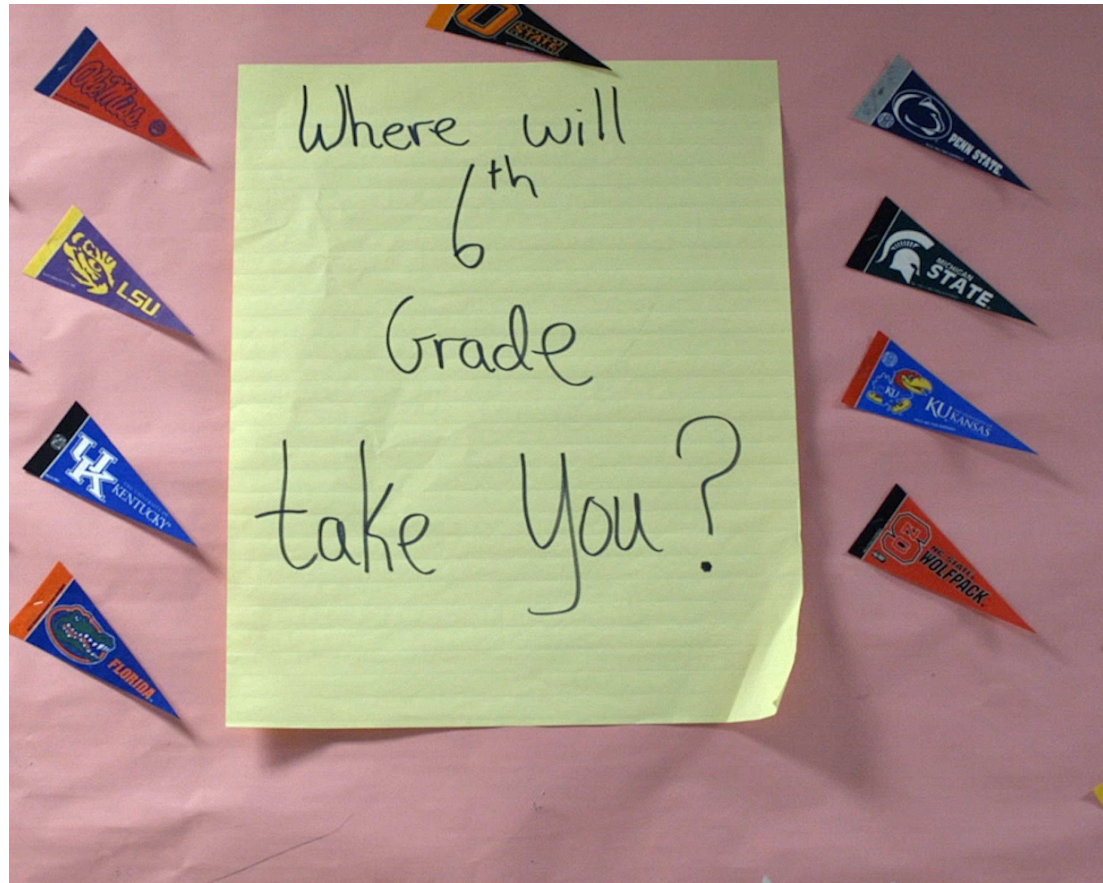
"When I was a teacher and able to lead PD and other major initiatives at the school, I gained an insight into what makes a school work well," she said. "By giving our teachers that opportunity we are allowing them to truly own and inform their work, and help to shape the future of our district."

Ruiz aims to select and develop a cadre of teacher leaders like Condon at every school in the district. An initial district effort to do so launched in 2016, but with only moderate success. Participating teachers received a small stipend and training, but at the end of the year it was clear that they were being used differently at each school, and not all were given space in their schedules to take on leadership roles.

In 2017 Ruiz forged a new partnership with Salem State University, which this year will launch its first-ever Teacher Leader Fellowship program. Participants will be enrolled in two semesters of coursework they can take after school hours, completing 12 credits in courses about topics including facilitating effective professional development and data analysis. At the end, they will receive a certificate and the opportunity to continue on toward an advanced degree in school leadership. The district will also partially supplement the cost, paying \$1,500 per teacher toward the \$2,400 cost for the 1-year program.

As a teacher, and now as a superintendent, Ruiz said she often hears other school and district leaders cite a lack of resources as the primary barrier to creating similar opportunities for their teachers. "This is no excuse," she said.

"If teachers are stepping up to do more, they need to be compensated," she said. "More often than not these projects require more time, including after school. But in the whole universe of things that superintendents should think about, this is a great investment and provides the school and the district with great returns. For me, this is a no-brainer."



What this looks like in practice

For Condon, this heightened district- and school-wide focus on teacher leadership have led to opportunity after opportunity for him to become a better educator, and to help others do the same. A graduate of the Salem Public Schools—including Collins—himself, he always knew he wanted to be a teacher. After a short stint teaching in Lynn, he returned to Collins as a special education teacher, working with six students in a separate classroom. When continued poor performance earned the district a Level 4 designation from the state in 2011, he was invited to join the school's data leadership team and began to learn about data routines. Condon, who switched over to ELA a few years after entering Collins, was quickly recognized for his leadership potential.

"When I asked for a bigger role, I was given the opportunity," he said. "I showed what I could do and the administrators continued to lean on me."

One of his primary responsibilities as a teacher leader is to oversee the weekly grade six ELA team meetings. He plans the agenda ahead of time and assigns pre-work to his team members so that when they actually come together to meet, they do most of the talking. Condon, in fact, stands behind them,



leaning on a desk, as his peer teachers talk curriculum, lesson plans and strategy to meet the needs of all of their students, including those with special needs and English learners. He interjects when he has something to add and keeps the conversation moving, but for the most part, stands back and lets the teachers talk through the issues at hand and reach a resolution as a group.

Since 2015 Condon's schedule has shifted to not only allow him to lead these weekly meetings, but also to maximize the time he can spend in the classrooms of his peer teachers. He now spends at least one period each day observing, and helping other teachers to learn the "Collins Way:" utilizing a workshop model and leaning on real-time data to inform decision-making and classroom instruction. And his hard work paid off—he started the 2017-2018 school year with a promotion to assistant principal, and a new title: director of teaching and learning.

"Administrators are busy, but getting regular, non-evaluative feedback from another teacher has made a big difference in my teaching," said Jackson Tingle, a third-year social studies teacher.

Unlike ELA and math, social studies and science classes are still just 43 minutes at Collins, and Tingle said he has struggled to fit in meaningful discussion with his students. Condon spent a few weeks observing his class regularly and kept track of the amount of time the students spent talking to each other, writ-

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ing and reading, versus the time they spent listening to Tingle talk.

After gathering the data he needed, Tingle and Condon met to discuss his primary recommendations: flipping the classroom model to minimize direct instruction to allow students to get into the text earlier, with less pre-teaching. This approach creates opportunities for the students to talk to one another and respond to quick prompts through short, closely monitored bursts of activity in the classroom.

Condon came in and taught a lesson using this method, and then Tingle adopted the approach. His students noticed, almost immediately.

"Now I manage myself and my classroom much better, and I'm always mindful of my time," Tingle said. "Students said that

3 THINGS TEACHERS CAN DO TO PURSUE LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES:

- Learn from other teachers—ask questions, use available resources and ask for help when you need it.
- Find something that you enjoy doing that can benefit students, and then find a way to make it happen in your school.
- Work with your school's administrative team to develop structural ways to make room for more teachers to take advantage of leadership opportunities.



I was teaching just like Mr. Condon, and they liked that.”

Condon sees his work with Tingle as one of his success stories.

“Sometimes kids ask what I’m doing in their classroom, but most of them just assume that I know what I’m talking about,” he said with a smile. “It makes my job easier. They get the idea that their teachers aren’t perfect, and that even we are always trying to improve. It’s great modeling.”

Walking the walk

On a sunny afternoon last spring, Condon’s roomful of sixth graders are fully engaged in a group discussion about a snowstorm in New York City. Using short, quick, active lessons, he guides them through a narrative fiction essay they’ve never seen before and soon has the students talking to one another, speaking up in front of the group and laughing—lots and lots of laughing.

In short, Condon models the advice he consistently gives his peers: talk less, listen more. Through it all he is in constant motion, moving from the front of the room to the back, zigzagging between tables, leaning over one student’s shoulder to help her sound out a word, leaning over another’s to comment on—and play with—his new fidget spinner. He uses PowerPoint slides filled with pop culture references to keep their attention

3

THINGS SCHOOL LEADERS SHOULD DO TO ENABLE TEACHER LEADERS TO FLOURISH:

- Listen to the staff. Do a needs assessment and determine the type of leadership gaps they feel exist in the school.
- Identify individuals already taking on leadership opportunities and provide them with the training, resources and support they need to be successful.
- Create time and space in the schedule to enable more teacher collaboration and opportunities for teacher leaders to mentor their peers.

while helping the class understand not just the depth within the short story, but also the vocabulary words they haven’t learned before, and the key literary components of the narrative.

“What would you do for fun in Salem if two feet of snow



suddenly fell tomorrow?" he asked the class, referencing the climactic scene in the essay. "Turn and talk." The classroom quickly fills with chatter as the students discuss with their neighbors. Condon waits a few minutes, then loudly counts backward from 5 to cue them to stop. Students who keep talking or get off track get a light tap on the shoulder; within seconds all eyes are on him. To pick a student to share out with the whole class he uses a dice rolling app on his phone to select a table number, and then a seat at that table. Each student who speaks gets two claps in thanks from the rest of the class.

It's this energy that makes the 90 minutes a day in his classroom fly by, students said.

"Sometimes he even lets us stand on our chairs," said 12-year-old Reny de la Cruz. Classmate Alaiza Pena, also 12, agreed. "He's always funny, and makes us all really excited to learn."

And while he doesn't boast about being a teacher leader, his students aren't surprised when they're told.

"When I'm in his class I know I'm being taught the best stuff,

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and in the best way," said 12-year-old Jessica Cruciani. "It makes me happy to be taught by him."

It's this level of success that reinforces the commitment that Burns, the Collins principal, has to continuing to support other teachers with great potential to grow into leaders.

"Our job as leadership is to create the conditions for our teachers and our students to excel," he said. "Without creating those conditions we are putting a lid on the container and saying this is as far as we can go. But without that lid, the sky's the limit."



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