



DECEMBER 2017

Kevin Cormier

SEVENTH AND EIGHTH GRADE MATH
NISSITISSIT MIDDLE SCHOOL
PEPPERELL, MASSACHUSETTS



Meet Kevin Cormier

SCHOOL: Nissitissit Middle School, Pepperell, MA

YEARS TEACHING: 12

PRIMARY SUBJECT: Seventh and eighth grade math

ROLES HE PLAYS AS A TEACHER LEADER: Serves as the math teacher leader facilitator, district data coordinator, member of the professional development committee

GO-TO WEBSITE: www.educationweek.com

GO-TO BLOG: www.educationpost.com

GO-TO TWITTER FEED: @cultofpedagogy



Kevin Cormier's classroom is lined with record albums, a reminder of his passion for music, his first career and why he became a teacher.

A communications major in college, Cormier's first job was in a record store selling vinyl and CDs to teenagers. His love for music was quickly overrun by his concern for his customers, who, more often than not, couldn't count out their change. "That was what prompted me to decide to teach," he said. "So I could teach those kids some math."

Today he teaches four math classes a day to seventh and

eighth graders at Nissitissit Middle School in Pepperell, but that's only the start of what he does. A slim, 42-year-old with close cropped hair and a beard, he is working to earn his doctorate; he is also a member of the state's Teacher Advisory Cabinet, mentors several of the other math teachers in his school, serves as one of two school-wide data coordinators, and—in his spare time—is co-designing an online tool to help teachers everywhere make better use of their data.

Through his efforts both in and out of the classroom, Cormier has had a notable impact on his school's culture, student performance, and his students, peers, school and district.

"A true teacher leader is someone who knows that their job goes well beyond the four walls of their classroom and the students in front of you, and that's Kevin," said Pepperell Assistant Superintendent Nancy Milligan. "Teacher leaders help our district move from the bottom up, not just the top down. They help us see the bigger picture."

A district-wide commitment to collaboration

Nissitissit Middle School is part of the North Middlesex Regional School District, a small regional district that serves students from the Central Massachusetts communities of Ashby, Pepperell and Townsend. About 3,100 students attend the district's eight schools, including more than 500 in fifth to eighth grade who attend Kevin's school. Performance-wise the district has consistently scored at or above the state average on assessments, and has maintained a level two accountability ranking out of the state's four-level system since 2011.

But when Assistant Superintendent Milligan started at the district in 2014, the piece that she knew could help bring the rural school district from good to great was missing: a district-wide commitment and focus on teacher leadership.

"Throughout my career I have always relied on teacher leaders," she said. "We need people in the trenches, working with children every day to truly understand where we need to go. The teachers are the ones following the journey of each student, and only when we work together toward a shared vision, mission and set of outcomes, can we move."

Today there are approximately 40 teacher leaders across the district, including up to eight in each school who are focused on aligning curriculum across the grade levels on the core academic subjects. World language and unified arts aren't part of their work now but will be in the future. These teachers also work together at the district level to provide input on the use of data and to inform policy and curriculum decisions.

Nissitissit Principal Diane Gleason has made adjustments in the schedule to enable Cormier and the school's other teachers to meet with their teams regularly to ensure they have time to collaborate on lesson planning and to share new ideas, problem solve, and discuss individual students.

This schedule flexibility and schoolwide focus on collaboration has helped to make teaching less isolating, said eighth grade math teacher Jamie Anderson.

"When you get your teaching license you find that it can be a lonely job sometimes," Anderson said. "It's just you and the kids and four walls. Having time to collaborate allows you to share your a-ha moments, and the negatives when things don't go well. It's important to give teachers a chance to be open about what's happening in their classroom and know that someone who understands is listening."

Principal Gleason said her goal is to make leadership and collaboration less of an exception and more of an expectation among her teachers.

"The biggest barriers are always going to be time and compensation, but we can work around that," she said. "Teachers work hard already and it's my job to work within the parameters of their day, be in their corner, and support them."

Today the district's team of teacher leaders have a set of regular routines that are built into their daily schedules, enabling them to contribute at both the school and district-wide level. Milligan convenes all of the teacher leaders in the district every six to eight weeks, and for the past two years Gleason has convened her six school-based teacher leaders every month to discuss issues they can then bring back to their content teams.

These meetings differ in structure from previous curriculum or team meetings because of their regularity, clear objectives and intense focus on actionable next steps. This year, for example, the Nissitissit teacher leaders are working to produce a series of curriculum maps and glossaries that teachers can put into use in their classrooms and during common planning time. These tools are giving the school's teachers a common language and roadmap to use while allowing them to retain their own personal style and creativity in their lesson planning.

"The more you allow teachers to collaborate, the stronger your school community will be," said Anderson. "We're not a business, we're creating the minds of the future. I want to

"When you get your teaching license you find that **it can be a lonely job sometimes**," Anderson said. "It's just you and the kids and four walls."



create great brains so I have nothing to worry about when I'm using a walker."

Once the school-based maps and glossaries are complete, the goal is to share these tools

with the high school to create a shared language and set of expectations for incoming freshmen. Eventually, Gleason said, the intent is to link the teacher leaders across the district to create more of a seamless experience for students as they progress through the system.

"I tell them from the beginning that this is not just lip service," Gleason said. "This isn't a temporary thing. We're making a long-term commitment here, and the more people see the value of working together as a community, the more the walls are broken down."

Cormier couldn't agree more.

"Collaborating leads to more success for students, it's as simple as that," he said. "This is not about me, it's about them, every day."

Datagogy

Cormier and Jamie Anderson, an eighth grade math teacher at Nissitissit, spend hours talking about data—how to use it, how not to use it, and why more teachers don't use it every day. Their theory: Most teachers have tons of data at their fingertips but it's overwhelming, they don't know how to use it and don't have the right tools to simplify the process.

Their solution: Datagogy, an online web tool designed to house a collection of resources to help teachers more effectively use their data. The site—which includes the tagline "Where data enhances instruction,"—is a simple one built on WordPress, but is rich with the information that teachers want and



“If a teacher is legit interested in bettering themselves and working to improve school culture, **why would you not get behind that?**”

can now easily access. The site directly addresses the fear that holds many teachers back, and is designed to break it down into bite-sized chunks that are easy to understand and intended to help teachers learn to collect, analyze and use their data to inform their instructional decisions in real time.

Anderson, like Cormier, has a hectic schedule—she carries a full load of classes, and is the school’s other data coordinator—but has made the time to collaborate with Cormier on this project because she knows how much other teachers need it.

“This is about two teachers helping other teachers,” she said. “This isn’t something that’s evaluative, this is just something that will help other teachers help their students.”

The two cooked up the idea after taking a professional development class on Excel, and immediately saw the untapped potential in the common spreadsheet program. Despite having no budget and no time during the school day to consistently work on it, the two have spent nights and weekends together

playing to their strengths in its development – Cormier has created most of the infrastructure, and Anderson has written most of the web copy and produced a few tutorial videos.

They have created a buzz among their peer teachers in their district, and once complete plan to promote it organically over social media to get it in the hands of teachers elsewhere in the state.

“Common planning time is important but only gets you so far,” Cormier said. “Using a website like this has the potential to get us in every classroom, and that’s powerful.”

Measuring up

Back in his classroom, Cormier is working on scale drawings with his eighth graders, a similar assignment to what he did with his seventh graders earlier in the day. For weeks they’ve been working on mastering scale calculations, and today they’re putting what they’ve learned to the test, and creating scale drawings of their desks from the top, front and side. As students walk in past a “Don’t talk about it. Be about it” poster, they’re told to grab a yardstick, get out their pencils, and get to work.

Within minutes the classroom is chaos—some students pair up, others work alone and those who need help turn to Cormier with questions. The classroom is loud and messy, with paper on the floor, calculators being passed around, and students



sitting, standing and walking between desks to compare notes. One student who doesn't know where to start asks for help and Cormier heads over to her desk. He grabs her yardstick and models how and where to hold it to measure the top of the desk. He pauses to make sure she understood the instructions, but doesn't give her the answer.

This exemplifies his teaching style: Here's what you have to do, here's how to do it, now go do it.

"This is my favorite class," said Ben Coviello, 13. "If we get something wrong he shows us what we did wrong and has us do it again until we get it right. He's teaching me stuff I didn't know I could learn."

Jolina Rich, 14, agreed. She didn't like math until Cormier was her teacher, and helped her to not just memorize facts, but to understand how it all worked. When she questioned whether she should take a summer class last year, Cormier told her something she'll never forget, Rich said.

"He said, 'Always strive for greatness versus settling for less,'" she recalled. "He told me 'Never relax when you can better yourself.' He's right."

By the end of the period most students had at least a rough draft of their scale drawings completed, and Cormier congratu-

3 THINGS TEACHERS CAN DO TO PURSUE LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES:

- **Believe in yourself.** Be confident that your voice is needed—whether you're new to the classroom or not, when you have an idea, have the confidence to speak up and move on it.
- **Build your network.** Reach beyond your own district and immediate peer group to stay better connected and learn about opportunities.
- **Pursue your passion.** Whether or not your idea comes with a stipend, if it's something you believe will make a difference for students, find a way to make it happen.



lated them on their hard work.

"This isn't easy," he said. "But even if you didn't get it today, you'll get it next time."

Expanding leadership elsewhere

As a young teacher, Cormier said he envisioned teacher leaders as being wizened, older educators who had been in the classroom for decades. Even today, as he is recognized for being a teacher leader himself, he still struggles to live up to his vision of the phrase, but is intent on continuously improving his craft.

"I constantly rate myself as a B- teacher," he said. "I am not the best teacher I know, but if you don't put yourself out there and try, nothing will ever change."

Cormier recognizes that the success and opportunities he's had at Nissitissit wouldn't have been possible without the full support he's received from Principal Gleason. Other principals should follow her lead, he said.

"If a teacher is legit interested in bettering themselves and working to improve school culture, why would you not get behind that?" he said.

Assistant Superintendent Milligan agrees.

"Teacher leaders know that they're responsible for all of the students, not just the ones on their roster," she said. "And they're also responsible for being there for their colleagues, and being the person others can go to with questions or concerns.

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

- **Trust your teachers.** If you have teachers who want to try something new, let them try and give them the space to make it work.
- **Make the time for your teachers to be leaders.** To expect teachers to do more than just teach in their classrooms they will need flexibility in their schedules.
- **Celebrate and validate the successes of your teacher leaders.** Your support will help to promote buy-in among other teachers and help show how the teachers' work is adding value.

They don't have to have all the answers, but good teacher leaders are always slightly ahead of their peers and able to help them move and grow."

"Every school and every district deserves someone like that," she said.



education**first**

experience | quality | results

For more information please visit www.education-first.com/teacherleadership