

# Leading Through Learning: One District's Experience



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## Welcome to Woodbury

The Woodbury Public Schools (WPS) case study tells the story of a fictionalized midsize school district in a midsize city in the United States. WPS is a composite of our experiences working with districts. The district has about 40,000 students, over half of whom are either Black or Latino. Among the student population, 80% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, 30% live in homes where a language other than English is spoken, and 15% qualify for special education services.

Two years ago, WPS adopted DASH, a new, more rigorous, curriculum in response to persistently low math and English state assessment scores and a curricular audit that showed class materials were neither aligned to state standards nor culturally responsive and culturally sustaining. Following adopting DASH, a number of schools' state test scores improved. Nearly a third of WPS's 80 schools, however, have not made marked improvements and still struggle to meet targets, including proficiency benchmarks and growth goals on statewide math and English assessments. These schools have been designated Priority Schools.

In response to this information, WPS leadership tapped Fabien, the deputy director of the Teaching and Learning team, to organize a new initiative designed to increase the faithful and effective uptake of the curriculum, with a focus on Priority Schools. WPS leadership says that improving the use of DASH will ensure Priority Schools meet their growth goals.

## Stage 1: Organizing the Effort

Fabien is prepared to meet with Alice, the executive director of Teaching and Learning, to discuss the preliminary composition of the team tasked with increasing the effective use of DASH. Fabien was a classroom teacher in one of the district's larger high schools the last time the district rolled out a new curriculum. He is eager to make sure there is adequate support for classroom teachers this time around. In keeping with the district's diversity and renewed commitment to equity, Fabien selects individuals who belong to a number of historically marginalized groups to serve as key members of the core team.

Having worked at the central office for the past three years, Fabien has seen how much the success of curriculum adoption and implementation depends on coordination among many people, including school leaders, the Teaching and Learning team, and several central office department chairs. He's hoping to bring on representation from each group. Fabien plans to share this list with Alice:

### Preliminary Team

- Alice, executive director of Teaching and Learning
- Bernard, district assessment coordinator
- Cole, humanities department chair
- Dante, district academic coordinator
- Fabien, deputy director of Teaching and Learning

Alice gives Fabien the go-ahead to contact the people on the list, but she asks that Fabien spearhead the initiative and leave her off the official team roster. Instead, the two of them will check in periodically to keep Alice up-to-date.

The following week, Dante, Cole, Bernard, and Fabien meet for the first time to set goals and map stakeholders. The team forms a consensus about the overall goal, but each person has different ideas for how to accomplish the goal. Fabien assures the team that it is OK not to agree on the strategy yet. For now, it's good enough to have a clearly defined goal. Fabien writes the goal on the whiteboard for the team to reference:

**Goal: Increase percentage of students in Priority Schools that implement the curriculum effectively and meet their growth goals.**

The team moves on to identifying their stakeholders using two tools: the influence/importance matrix (Figure 1.1) and the stakeholder map (Figure 1.2).

**Figure 1.1: Influence/Importance Matrix**

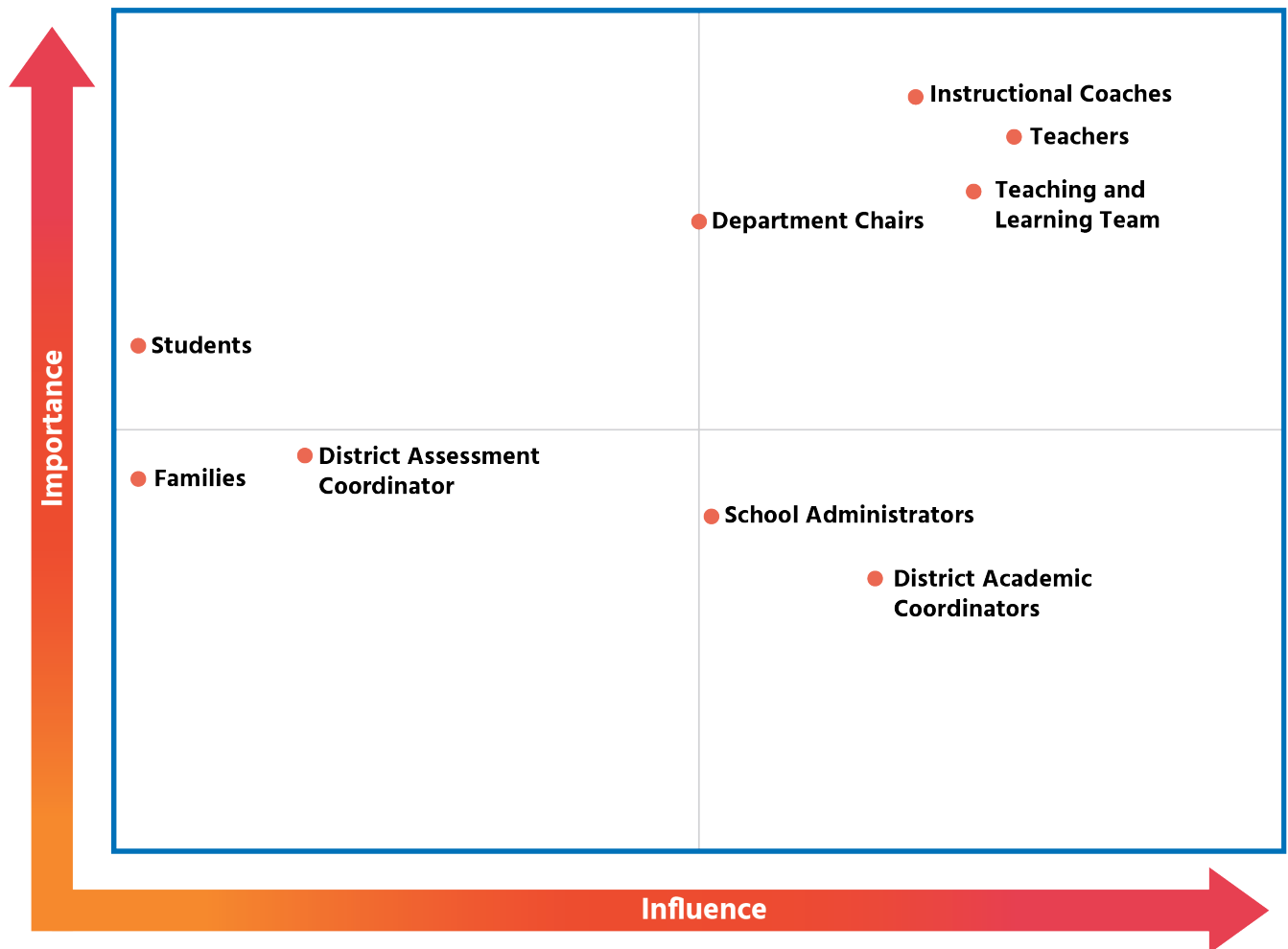
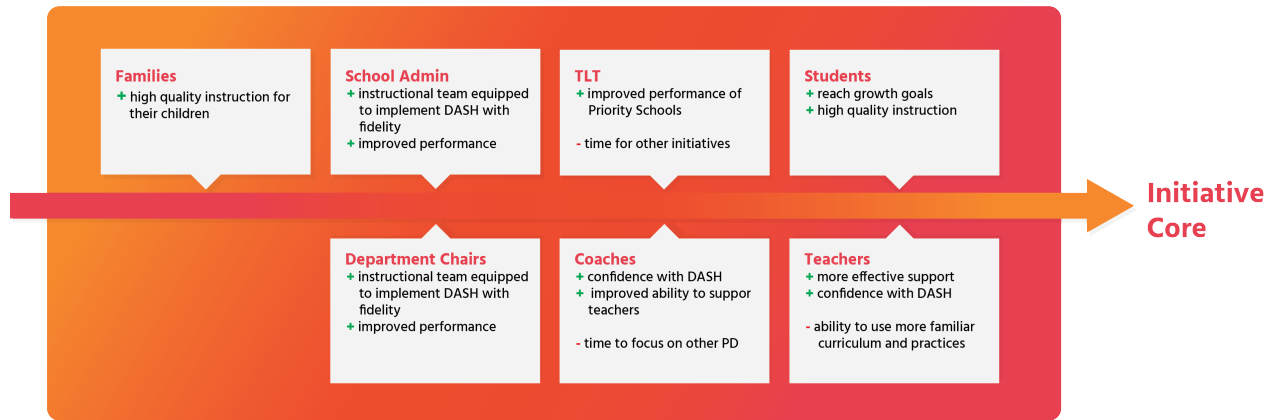


Figure 1.2: Stakeholder Map



As a result of the mapping exercises, the team notices two roles that are close to the initiative's core, have a good amount of influence, and are deeply invested in the initiative: teachers and instructional coaches. The team decides to expand its membership to include a member of each group. Since the majority of their Priority Schools are elementary schools, they select Graciela, a lead teacher on the third-grade team, and Eleanor, an instructional coach for third-grade teachers. Graciela and Eleanor agree to join.

The team notes that the majority of the instructional staff has a different racial and ethnic background than many WPS students and families. They note that one way to mitigate this imbalance is to increase the influence of families and students. They invite parent members of the school leadership team where Graciela teaches. The parents agree to rotate attendance at meetings. The adjusted team composition is as follows:

### Adjusted Team

- Graciela, third-grade lead teacher
- Eleanor, third-grade instructional coach
- Dante, district academic coordinator
- Cole, humanities department chair
- Bernard, district assessment coordinator
- Fabien, deputy director of Teaching and Learning
- Ilia, parent
- Jackson, parent

The following week, the team gathers to develop norms and to define ownership over the initiative. The team generates the following preliminary set of working norms and divides ownership roles using a RACI matrix (Table 1.1).

**Table 1.1: Norms**

<b>Communication Norms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use email as the primary mode of communication.</li> <li>• Reply within 48 hours (even just to acknowledge receipt).</li> <li>• Lead with curiosity—ask questions before making judgments.</li> </ul>
<b>Decision-Making Norms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whenever possible, try to reach consensus.</li> <li>• If there is disagreement, use a straw poll or consult a third party to reach a decision.</li> </ul>
<b>Document Management Norms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Save and store all improvement-related documents in the shared Google Drive folder.</li> </ul>
<b>Meeting Norms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meet every other week at district office.</li> <li>• Notify team of any conflicts 72 hours in advance.</li> <li>• Fabien will send an agenda each Monday.</li> <li>• Use <i>Robert's Rules of Order</i> to conduct meetings.</li> </ul>

### RACI For Initiative

- Responsible: Bernard, Cole, Dante, Eleanor, Graciela, instructional coaches, teachers
- Accountable: Fabien
- Consulted: Alice, DASH curriculum support team
- Informed: district superintendent

## Stage 2: Mapping Woodbury’s System and Strategy

Over the next several meetings, Fabien and the team work to understand the system and the problem in order to create a strategy for the new initiative.

Before designing the strategy for a solution, the team wants to make sure it has accurately defined the problem. It begins with a problem statement that is simply a negative framing of their goal. Since their goal is to increase the percentage of students in Priority Schools who meet their growth goals, the team initially stated the problem as:

**Initial Problem Statement: Too few students in Priority Schools meet their growth goals.**

Graciela proposes the team dig a bit deeper. She knows firsthand that many issues, just under the surface, influence student achievement. The team agrees and decides to use some causal analysis tools to refine and clarify the problem. They begin with the 5 Whys (Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3: 5 Whys



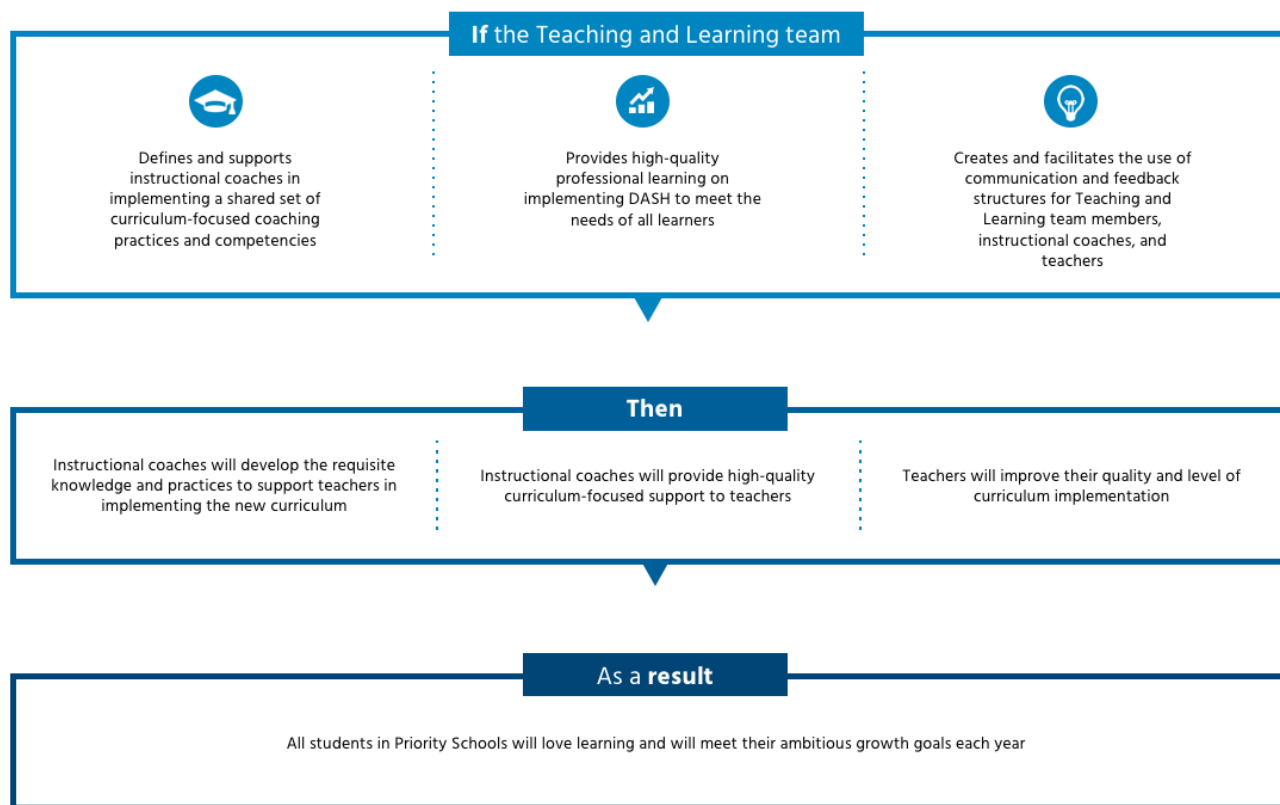
As Graciela suspected, many factors were at play in limiting student achievement. Conducting causal analysis revealed high-leverage factors within the locus of control of the Teaching and Learning team and that will ultimately improve student achievement. The team revises their problem statement:

**Revised Problem Statement: Instructional Coaches, who are teachers' main source of curricular training, have limited knowledge of and comfort implementing the new curriculum.**

Eleanor, an instructional coach, suggests they validate this problem statement and prepare to draft their strategy. To do so, she and the remaining team members interview instructional coaches from Priority and non-Priority schools. They also interview a handful of teachers and school leaders of Priority schools, review classroom observation notes, and speak with colleagues from a peer district that recently strengthened the effectiveness of their coaching team. In addition, they review articles on high-quality curriculum adoption and implementation.

With this fuller understanding of the problem, which begins with the instructional coaching offered to teachers, the team sets about designing its strategy. They conduct additional research and have several conversations with stakeholders. In a series of collaborative working sessions, the team finishes the first draft of its high-level strategy. After sharing it with a number of stakeholders, including many of the instructional coaches they interviewed during background research, the team revises their initial high-level strategy and decides to move forward with the one in Figure 1.4 below.

**Figure 1.4: Theory of Action**



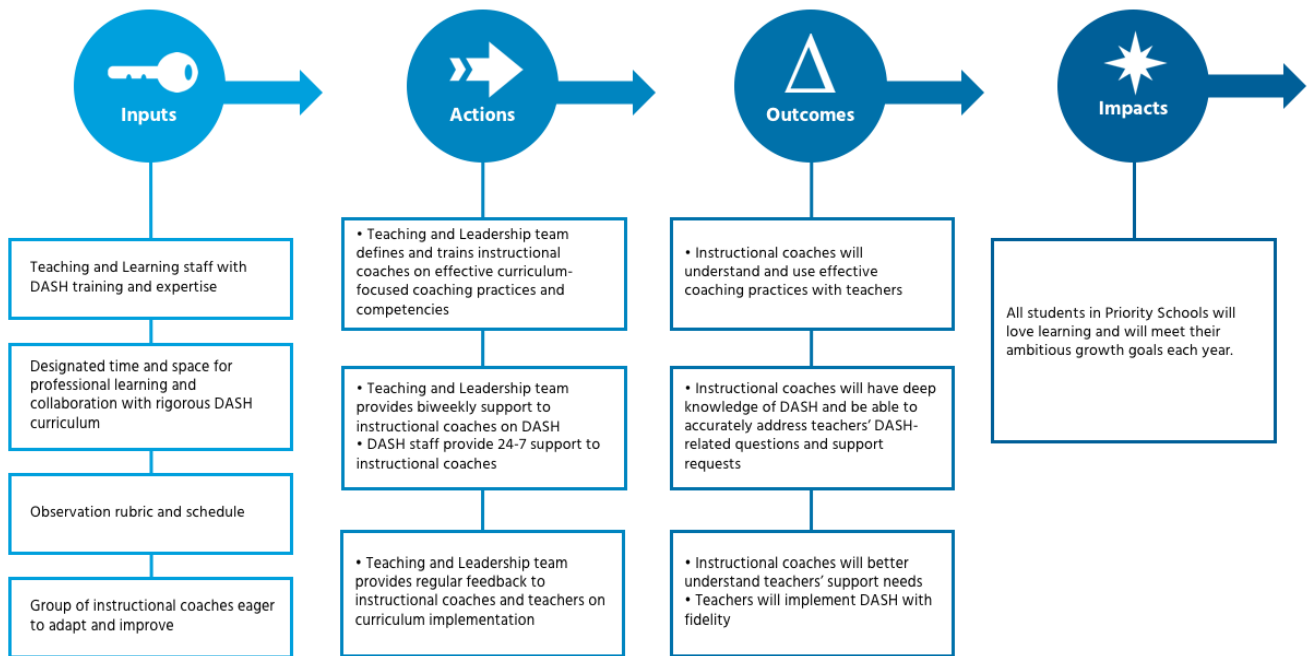
Fabien schedules a check-in meeting with Alice to discuss the team's progress. Alice is thrilled by the team's efforts to include a range of stakeholders, and she agrees with the high-level strategy. Alice's main concern is putting the theory into action: Who will do what? What support will they require? How will they know if the strategy is successful? Alice's questions remind Fabien, who is still celebrating the milestone of achieving consensus around a shared strategy, of the work ahead. Now that team



members are equipped with a high-level vision of what the team believes will help them address the problem and accomplish their goal, it is time to operationalize that vision.

In the team's next meeting, Fabien introduces members to the Operationalized Theory of Action (OPTA). Through a series of brainstorming sessions, they flesh out their strategy with detail about how they'll accomplish it. A snapshot of the team's OPTA is in Figure 1.5 below.

**Figure 1.5: OPTA**



After completing the OPTA, the team takes a moment to reflect on their composition before embarking on measurement. All agree that the team would benefit from the participation of someone from the district's data team. Fabien invites Howie, one of the district's data specialists, to join. Once Howie is on board they move on to measurement.



## Stage 3: Defining Woodbury’s Measurement Framework

At the outset, the team decides to measure a few key components of their strategy:

- time and space available for training coaches
- training provided to instructional coaches
- use of effective coaching practices with teachers
- teachers’ improvement in curriculum implementation
- student performance

With support from Howie and the data and instructional personnel in a few of Woodbury’s schools, the team constructs the measurement framework, a selection of which can be viewed in Table 1.2 below.

**Table 1.2. Woodbury’s OPTA**

OPTA Element	Measure	Tools	Expectations
<b>Input</b> Designated time and space for professional learning and collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time allotted to training on DASH curriculum</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instructional coach training calendar</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least half of scheduled meetings in the first quarter will be spent on DASH training</li> </ul>
<b>Action</b> Teaching and Leadership team trains instructional coaches on effective curriculum-focused coaching practices and competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarity of IC competencies</li> <li>• Level of information provided at trainings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Written feedback from experienced instructional coaches</li> <li>• Post-training survey</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experienced instructional coaches say competencies are very clear</li> <li>• 80% of participating instructional coaches rate the training highly informative</li> </ul>
<b>Outcome</b> Instructional coaches leverage effective coaching practices with teachers  Teachers improve in curriculum implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrated improvement in use of effective practices in coaching sessions</li> <li>• The number of teachers who implement the curriculum as designed (rubric category 3)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coach observation rubric</li> <li>• Teacher observation rubric</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 100% of instructional coaches score effective or highly effective</li> <li>• Out of 10 participating teachers, 5 of them will score effective or highly effective on category 3: “implement as designed”</li> </ul>
<b>Impact</b> All students in Priority Schools will love learning and will meet their ambitious growth goals each year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Percentage of students achieving or surpassing their growth goal on the quarterly assessment</li> <li>• Percentage of students who report that they enjoy school on the annual student survey</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quarterly benchmark assessments</li> <li>• Annual student perception survey</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 90% of students who did not meet their growth goals on the quarterly benchmark assessments will increase their performance by at least 10 points in the next quarter.</li> <li>• 80% of students report that they agree or strongly agree on question 3 on the student survey</li> </ul>

## Stage 4: Implementing and Observing Woodbury's Strategy

The team is ready to start putting its strategy into action. It starts with a subset of Priority Schools, all elementary schools in which the school leaders have explicitly expressed their support for the initiative. First, Fabien schedules conversations with the school leaders to confirm their interest in participating and shares additional details about what the initiative will require of them and their teams. School leadership nominates and introduces the initiative to team members they believe would be willing and interested in the initiative. Once Fabien receives the list of confirmed participants from each school, he shares it with Eleanor, who conducts information sessions at each school. With all parties informed about and supportive of the initiative, the team is ready to implement its strategy.

They agree to check-in throughout implementation but plan a meeting to review results in a month.

## Stage 5: Problem-Solving and Improving in Woodbury

The core team gathers to analyze and discuss the data it has collected about the first month of implementation. The team confirms that it has secured the inputs identified as critical on its OPTA. It also has data on the implementation of a small set of actions, including the level and quality of instructional coach trainings.

The team is happy to have scheduled the target number of trainings. But team members see that instructional coaches do not appear to be gaining as much knowledge as a result of the trainings as was expected. Instead of 80%, only 20% of teachers self-reported an increase in knowledge on DASH as a result of training.

The team agrees with Fabien to focus its problem-solving efforts on ensuring that instructional coaches increase their capacity to support teachers. Additional instructional coaches who have been participating in the training are invited to join the core team for the duration of the problem-solving cycle. To map out all the reasons why so few instructional coaches self-reported an increase in knowledge, the team completes a fishbone diagram.

As the team reviews the completed fishbone diagram, there is one significant cause: The training is lecture driven and does not differentiate by content or grade level. The team focuses on incorporating greater differentiation and interactive activities in the learning sessions, starting with a separate session for coaches depending on the grade band they support. Coaches supporting grades K to 2 will attend one training, while those supporting grades 3 to 5 will attend another. They also survey instructional coaches on their learning needs to be sure the planned scope and sequence is responsive. Over the next month, there are four training sessions scheduled. The team agrees to meet after the first two take place to study the results. View the full short-cycle testing plan in Table 1.3 below.

Table 1.3. Woodbuy's Short-Cycle Test

Plans	
<b>1a. Test Steps</b>	<p>To test a way to increase the quality of curriculum-focused training for instructional coaches:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Eleanor and Dante will create a survey to gather more information from instructional coaches about their learning needs.</li> <li>Eleanor, Fabien, and the Teaching and Leadership trainers will review survey data and revise the agendas for the next two trainings, including increased differentiation by grade bands and increased opportunities for application and planning during trainings.</li> </ul>
<b>1b. Learning Goals</b>	<p>We hope to learn:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does segmenting the group by grade band increase the number of coaches' whose self-reported knowledge of DASH improves as a result of the training?</li> <li>How does shifting from lecture based to application based increase the amount of knowledge coaches gain during training?</li> </ul>
<b>1c. Measures</b>	<p>We will know if this change is an improvement by examining performance on the following measures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Percentage of instructional coaches who self-report increases in knowledge of DASH as a result of the training (post-training survey)</li> </ul>
<b>1d. Predictions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>80% of instructional coaches participating in the trainings will indicate that their understanding of DASH and their confidence in supporting teachers' implementation increased or greatly increased because of the training</li> </ul>
Do	
<b>2a. Observations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dante and Eleanor survey the participating coaches to understand their learning needs. They receive responses from 80% of the instructional coaches. Fabien, Eleanor, and the Teaching and Leadership trainers create the new agenda and test the new format in two training sessions.</li> </ul>

When they come back to study their results the team is excited to see an increase in the number of coaches self-reporting an increase in knowledge of DASH. The team adds an action to their OPTA: Use data on coach skills and training session interests to design curriculum-focused training sessions. The remainder of the PDSA template is displayed in the table below:

**Table 1.3. Woodbuy’s Short-Cycle Test, Continued**

Study	
<b>3a. Predictions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>80% of instructional coaches participating in the trainings will indicate that their understanding of DASH and their confidence in supporting teachers' implementation increased or greatly increased because of the training.</li> </ul>
<b>3b. Results</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>90% of instructional coaches participating in the K-to-2 trainings indicate that their understanding of DASH and their confidence in supporting teachers' implementation increased or greatly increased because of the training.</li> <li>50% of instructional coaches participating in the grades 3-5 trainings indicate that their understanding of DASH and their confidence in supporting teachers' implementation increased or greatly increased because of the training.</li> </ul>
<b>3c. Learnings</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We learned the division by grade band and facilitation changes seems effective at improving the quality of trainings for K-to-2 coaches. It was exciting to exceed our 80% target for this group and see that 90% of coaches found the training increased their knowledge of DASH.</li> <li>We are unsure why the same actions produced only a slight increase in the percentage of coaches who self-reported increased knowledge of DASH in grades 3 to 5. To increase survey participation, we did not seek open-ended explanations of the responses. We wished we had done so for both groups so we could understand, in more detail, what is working well in the K-to-2 training and what needs improving in the three to five trainings.</li> </ul>
Act	
<b>4a. Next Steps</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The TLT trainers will continue to segment the teachers and use an application-based model for the remaining two sessions.</li> <li>Fabien will modify the post-training survey to include a required short-answer explanation of the answer about coaches' knowledge of DASH.</li> <li>Graciela will follow up with the instructional coaches in grades 3 to 5 to learn more about their satisfaction with and ideas for improving the training.</li> <li>The team will regroup after the next two meetings to discuss results. Two additional instructional coaches from grades 3 to 5 will join the next problem-solving meeting.</li> </ul>

## Stage 6: Acting On and Spreading Learning at Woodbury

It's been nearly a year since the initiative launched, and the team has engaged in several problem-solving cycles to refine its strategy.

Once again, Fabien and Alice meet to discuss the progress of the initiative. Fabien is excited by all that team members have learned. After a number of additional short problem-solving cycles, the team was able to improve the quality of DASH trainings for instructional coaches working in grades 3 to 5. After two months of trainings, 90% of teachers consistently self-reported an increase in knowledge as a result of the trainings. The team drew a valuable lesson from their efforts to improve the quality of trainings: a strategy that works in one context will likely need some adjusting to produce the same results in others. In the two quarterly assessments administered since the initiative launched, students with a teacher participating in the initiative experienced growth of 10 to 15 points. School leaders have taken note and more are requesting to become a part of the initiative. Fabien tells Alice that to spread the knowledge and test how their strategy works in different settings, they'll need to engage with more people in the district. Fabien shares that he already scheduled a series of webinars and in-person meetings with additional schools and district leaders to recruit them to the effort. With this new group, Fabien will go through all the steps again. Fabien will lead this new team in organizing the effort, revisiting the existing strategy, and developing a shared understanding of the system, strategy, and goals before proceeding to implementation.

On his way back to his desk, Fabien receives a message from Eleanor. It's a picture of her alongside a teacher who had just had a stellar observation. Fabien prints the image and places it on his bulletin board—a reminder that Leading Through Learning, so often complex and challenging, has its rewards.

