Innovative Staffing to Personalize Learning:
RANSON IB MIDDLE SCHOOL

CHARLOTTE, NC

This case study is part of a series about schools that use non-traditional staffing arrangements to personalize learning. All schools profiled have demonstrated noteworthy student achievement results.

Ranson IB Middle School, an Opportunity Culture and International Baccalaureate school in the Project L.I.F.T. zone of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, provides personalized instruction using a combination of multi-classroom leaders, small-group teaching, online learning, and a focus on in-the-moment instructional adjustments according to each student's needs. **Multi-classroom leaders (MCLs)** extend the reach of their excellent teaching to more students by leading small **teaching teams**. MCLs at Ranson write the lesson plans for their teams, co-teach and model lessons, pull out small student groups, observe and coach their team teachers, and lead data analysis for instructional and grouping adjustments. Ranson provides higher pay for multi-classroom leaders solely through reallocations of its budget.

Educator roles and responsibilities

- **Multi-classroom leaders:** Lead a team of four teachers (with a few exceptions), coaching them weekly, often daily; writing all lesson plans; co-teaching and modeling; analyzing data; and teaching individual students and small groups
- **Team teachers:** Teach classes under the guidance of multi-classroom leaders, organized by subject teams

Key instructional practices

- Whole-group & small-group instruction; individual tutoring
- Small groups adjusted daily or weekly based on data; grouped by same learning level
- Teachers differentiate levels, work, and occasionally products for each student through assignments and, in some subjects, online playlists; students advance based on mastery
- Students help set learning goals
- Students do some work in peer teams
- Teachers coach students in social & emotional skills

Technology use

- Blended learning: **Station Rotation**
- Provides students with differentiated content instruction; assesses student mastery
- Provides teachers with digital data system so they can individually & as a team track each student's progress, and adjust instruction/student groupings as needed
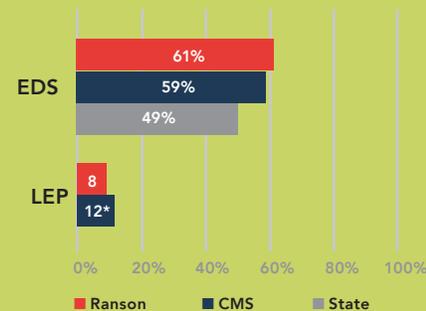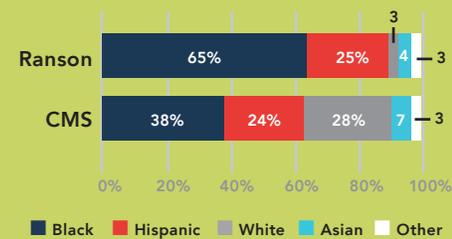
### SCHOOL PROFILE, 2017–18

Campuses: 1
Grades: 6–8
Enrollment: 893

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

	Black	Hispanic	White	Asian	Other
Ranson	65%	25%		4	3 / 3
CMS	38%	24%	28%	7	3

■ Black　■ Hispanic　■ White　■ Asian　□ Other

	Ranson	CMS	State
EDS	61%	59%	49%
LEP	8	12*	

■ Ranson　■ CMS　■ State

EDS: Economically disadvantaged students
LEP: Limited English proficiency students

*2015

STUDENT GROWTH

	Met growth	Exceeded growth
All CMS 2016–17	45%	26%

■ Met growth　■ Exceeded growth
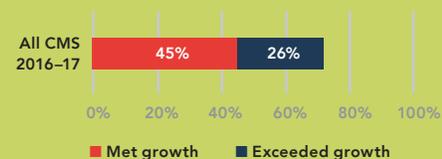
Ranson exceeded growth expectations in the state's value-added system in 2014–15 & 2015–16, and met growth in 2016–17.

THE RANSON TEACHING AND LEARNING EXPERIENCE

When Alison Harris Welcher became principal at Ranson IB Middle School in 2011, she found a school in chaos. After bringing safety and structure to the school, she focused on its academic needs. Many students needed to make high growth consistently to catch up to grade-level proficiency. To achieve that growth, she focused on recruiting and retaining excellent teachers. Ranson was in the Project L.I.F.T. zone, a public-private partnership created to turn around nine persistently struggling schools within Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, and it was one of the first **Opportunity Culture** schools in the country. Under the leadership of Welcher, and continued through the current principal, Erica Jordan-Thomas, Ranson's results improved quickly after taking Opportunity Culture and the Multi-Classroom Leadership model schoolwide in 2014–15. That year, it posted the highest student growth among Title I district schools in the state, and landed in the state's top 1 percent overall for growth. After its sixth-grade science multi-classroom leader began leading all the science teachers in sixth through eighth grades, Ranson had the highest science growth of any middle school in the district.[1]

Staffing model

Ranson relies on **multi-classroom leaders (MCLs)** to guide its teachers—of whom nearly 50 percent are in their first three years of teaching. Leading teams of four teachers (typically) to develop their skills and expertise and provide excellent instruction to all students, MCLs are responsible for:

- **Coaching:** MCLs are in their teachers' classrooms multiple times a week, sometimes daily, observing team teachers while they teach. They analyze data they gather in teacher observations to provide targeted teacher coaching. MCLs meet with teachers before and after the observation to refine instruction and classroom management and ensure follow-through on improvements, typically focusing on one improvement at a time. In team meetings or one on one, they often lead teachers through a practice session delivering instruction. Ranson MCLs also make heavy use of **Real-Time Teacher Coaching**, a program from CT3 that uses live coaching—MCLs use a walkie-talkie to speak directly to a teacher through a headset as a lesson is happening, so teachers can immediately put the coaching into action. (Note: This is not a required element for MCLs in an Opportunity Culture.)

- **Modeling and co-teaching:** MCLs sometimes model lessons to demonstrate a teaching method or how to teach particular content; they may co-teach during some small-group rotations.

- **Planning:** MCLs create all the lesson plans and assessments their teachers use. Each team has classes scheduled so that the whole team can meet twice a week with the MCL to review lesson plans and student data, as well as with individual teachers to discuss challenges, plan changes, practice lesson delivery, and address other concerns.

- **Analyzing data:** MCLs analyze student data themselves as well as lead the data analysis done by their teams. They then use their analyses to adjust and personalize instruction by changing lesson plans or lesson delivery and adjusting small-group assignments according to students' levels of content mastery.

- **Teaching:** MCLs teach individual students and small groups, as needed, and sometimes a whole class while modeling or co-teaching.

For a sample MCL schedule, see Figure 1, page 3.

Ranson places a premium on coaching and collaboration for all staff, so MCLs:

- Receive weekly individual coaching from either the principal or one of the two assistant principals.

- Collaborate with other MCLs formally through weekly meetings of the schoolwide instructional leadership team, made up of the principal and assistant principals, to receive professional development together and address schoolwide issues.

- Collaborate informally throughout the week, using one another as sounding boards.

- Attend district-wide MCL training sessions or cohort meetings.

FIGURE 1. SAMPLE MCL SCHEDULE

TIME	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY
8:00–9:30	Greet students on arrival and observe and coach teachers on routines and classroom management procedures		
9:30	Teacher A observation	Teacher A follow-up observation	Instructional Leadership Team meeting (all MCLs, principal, assistant principal)
10:00–11:00	Teacher B follow-up observation	Support Teacher B	Instructional Leadership Team meeting (all MCLs, principal, assistant principal)
11:00	Plan post-conference on Teacher B follow-up observation	Teacher C observation	Instructional Leadership Team meeting (all MCLs, principal, assistant principal)
11:30	Support Teacher C in classroom (coaching, helping small groups)	Pull small group based on data analysis from Monday meeting	Instructional Leadership Team meeting (all MCLs, principal, assistant principal)
12:00	Lunch	Plan post-conference for Teacher C	Check in with all team teachers
12:30	Support Teacher A	Planning	Planning
1:00–2:00	Planning	Planning	Planning
2:00	Teacher B post-conference	Teacher C post-conference	Planning
2:30	Teacher B post-conference	Observation tracker updating	Planning
3:00–4:00	Teaching team meeting (data analysis)	Teaching team meeting (instruction)	Planning
4:00	Bus Duty— a chance to observe teachers & interact with students	Bus Duty— a chance to observe teachers & interact with students	Bus Duty— a chance to observe teachers & interact with students
4:30–5:30	Coaching conversation with principal	As needed	As needed

Team teachers are responsible for instruction and student learning in their respective classrooms, and they receive significant direction, feedback, and coaching from their MCLs, as described above.

The student learning experience

Ranson students maintain a traditional middle school schedule of class periods for English, math, science, social studies, and electives. Within their core classes, their instruction is **personalized** through **small-group instruction** led by their teacher

and sometimes by an MCL. Groups are based on learning needs and change day to day based on how students perform on daily in-class learning checks or other test data. Instruction is also personalized through **limited use of the Station Rotation model** of blended learning and through **strategies to identify daily gaps** in students' understanding and address them immediately. The application of these methods varies among the subject teams.

- In *science,* students are given a "learn check" approximately weekly, which tests them on three concepts—what was taught that week (A), what was taught the previous week (B), and what was taught the week before that (C). The MCL reviews the data from these tests and, on a weekly blended-learning day, pulls into a small group the students who failed to show mastery of concept C. The classroom teacher takes another group, which is working at the expected pace, for a preview of the next concept to be taught; a third group, which has demonstrated mastery already, works online on MCL-created extension work. The groups switch the next day, with the on-track group now with the MCL, the group that was struggling with mastery of old material now learning the new concept from the teacher, and the mastery-level students continuing to work on advanced, MCL-created instruction online. If students who were reviewing the "C" concept still fail to master it, they are given individual tutoring by the teacher or MCL.

- In *math,* teachers and MCLs determine when to use in-class rotations—generally when new topics are being introduced. Half the class works online on teacher- or MCL-created content and the other half works with the teacher; the groups, which are created according to current topic mastery, switch either halfway through the period or the next day. Students have the teacher alone on some days and the MCL and teacher together on other days.

- In *English language arts,* students may work online as a whole group, but personalized online work generally occurs only for students needing remediation, usually limited to about 15 minutes daily. Personalization otherwise happens through small-group instruction as needed.

In all subjects, students get individual attention daily through two in-class strategies that MCLs and team teachers rely on to immediately address student learning difficulties and keep students from falling too far behind:

- By using aggressive monitoring, teachers make repeated loops around the classroom while students work, noting who may be struggling; those students are pulled into a small group before leaving class for the day to get help.

- By using a "do now" exercise as soon as students arrive in class, teachers can assess what students know. Each do-now has one question reviewing the previous day's lesson and one acting as a diagnostic for that day's lesson. If more than half the class struggles with the review question, the teacher reteaches to the whole class; occasionally, the diagnostic shows the entire class has mastered that day's content, so the teacher moves on to the next lesson. Most often, a small group fails to show mastery of the review question and is pulled out for help—in ELA, this happens immediately while other students read independently; in math, small groups meet during skills practice time.

The school has also begun offering to very advanced students the option of trying an online class through N.C. Virtual Public Schools, with the expectation that about 70 students will enroll in and complete a course.

Technology use

Ranson is a 1-to-1 school, although students do not take their laptops home. When students work online, they use instructional activities created by teachers and MCLs that are housed in **Canvas** and **Nearpod** and differentiated for student groups based on their content mastery. Additionally, ELA students needing deep remediation use **Compass Learning** online.

Compensation and funding model

Ranson's principal has autonomy to determine how to spend her budget to create MCL pay supplements. The school pays MCLs more by reallocating its budget in a way that slightly increases class sizes; for example, subject classes typically have 20 to 30 students. By reducing the number of teachers hired for a grade by one and spreading that class's students among the remaining teachers—about two to three more students per class—money is freed to pay MCLs more. MCLs who lead four teachers receive a supplement of $16,000; MCLs leading five to eight teachers receive a $23,000 supplement. Supplements are paid in addition to the MCL's salary on the regular school district compensation schedule. For reference, the average teacher salary in North Carolina in 2016 was $47,941, and starting pay on the Charlotte-Mecklenburg salary schedule for teachers with a bachelor's degree is $40,246.50, with a top salary of $60,046.70 for a teacher with a bachelor's degree and 35 years or more of experience.[2]

Endnotes

[1] Subsequent research released by the CALDER Center indicates that Ranson is not alone in achieving better outcomes. The research showed that teachers who were on average at the 50th percentile in student learning gains, who then joined teams led by teacher-leaders known as multi-classroom leaders, or MCLs (who had prior high growth as teachers), produced learning gains equivalent to those of teachers from the 75th to 85th percentile in math, and, in six of the seven statistical models, from 66th to 72nd percentile in reading. Teams had a median of five teachers in addition to the MCL. For more information, see: Hansen, M., & Backes, B. (2018, January 25). New teaching model yields learning improvement for students in math [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2018/01/25/new-teaching-model-yields-learning-improvement-for-students-in-math/

[2] For North Carolina salary, see table C-5 in: National Education Association. (2017, May). Rankings & Estimates: Rankings of the states 2016 and estimates of school statistics 2017. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/2017_Rankings_and_Estimates_Report-FINAL-SECURED.pdf; CMS starting pay retrieved from district's 2017–18 Bachelor "A" Schedule, retrieved from http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/Jobs/Documents/2017-2018%20Teacher%20Bachelor%20A%20Schedule.pdf