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# Leading Improvement with Hearts, Minds, and ‘Data with a Soul’

*An aligned Improvement Team, a commitment to improving outcomes for all kids, and a focus on co-teaching and planning lead to visible improvements in the virtual classroom.*



## LOS ANGELES, CALIF.

Change management is hard. Organizations often flounder in their efforts to pivot, adapt, and improve. Team members may not be completely bought in to new initiatives, individuals may be unclear as to their role in the change, and new structures and protocols take time to produce results. We launch, we muddle, we falter.

One way to overcome these challenges is to introduce little bits and pieces of a larger task over time, as the need arises, so that every team member is on board, and no incremental addition feels radically disruptive. In all school improvement efforts, it's important to lead with empathy: listening to the needs of teachers and students, inviting voices from every level of the school system to participate in problem identification and solution design, and adapting tools and processes for improvement to meet people where they are. Using this approach, we can be bold. We can make important systemic change because hearts, minds, and data are aligned on a student-centered goal, even as tasks and milestones evolve.

In our work with **Green Dot Public Schools** as part of the Charter Students with Disabilities Pilot Community, we've witnessed a glowing example of how one charter school network is building capacity to lead improvement at scale: with hearts, minds, and—to borrow the team's own terminology—'data with a soul'. Over the course of our first year as a networked improvement community, we've seen how the Green Dot Improvement Team has weathered a pandemic year, pivoted to remote learning, and made co-teaching better than ever by consistently applying the principles and practices of continuous improvement.

Green Dot has focused one effort on developing exemplary co-teaching practices, and already the improvement team's hard work is paying off. "I haven't seen better co-teaching than what I was seeing [in informal classroom observations at **Ánimo Watts College Preparatory Academy**]. There's good stuff happening in those classrooms," says **Alyce Prentice**, Area Superintendent of high schools.

**Mike Curry**, Assistant Principal at **Ánimo Mae Jemison Charter Middle School (AMJ)**, reports that co-taught classes are seeing higher student assignment turn-in rates than other classes.

At AMJ, one English teacher taught a mix of co-taught and regular classes, so it was the perfect way to compare how students in differently taught classes showed up, engaged, and turned in their work. "Two teachers are better able to support and follow up with students," he explains, when teaching pairs are working in unison, with clear norms and roles, in support of a classroom that breaks down barriers between General Education and Special Education—to the advantage of all kids.



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Animo Mae Jemison Charter Middle School

In the virtual classroom, well-planned co-teaching partnerships are even more critical.

“Co-teachers are working together to adapt lessons in the moment, based on student engagement and feedback,” says Assistant Principal Curry. This means that one teacher can instruct students, while the other teacher can monitor real-time classroom input from tools such as Nearpod to inform live adaptations. So one teacher might remark to the other: *‘It looks like five kids just missed this concept. Can I take these five kids into a breakout room to work on that?’*—allowing for adaptable, responsive instruction that meets the needs of all kids in the Zoom room.

So how did the Green Dot Improvement Team pull off the introduction of an enhanced co-teaching model while navigating virtual instruction and serving a student population that includes over 14% of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)?

### IMPROVEMENT TEAMS

It wasn’t easy. **Improvement Teams** combine individual strengths and perspectives to make lasting impacts for students. Putting together an Improvement Team requires

representation of diverse voices across the school community: from a network-wide **project sponsor** who guides the vision of student impact to **school leaders** who step forward to support the work of continuous improvement at their school sites. **Special Education and General Education teachers** at focal school sites work together to conduct tests of change and gather responsive classroom-level data on student outcomes, while **data leads** create responsive tools to progress-monitor the project alongside external measurement experts. Finally, there are educators who project-manage the entire internal team at the charter network, document improvement cycles, keep their ears to the ground with data collection, and bring the whole team together under a unified Aim: the **Improvement Leads**.

This broad-based approach to making change requires rigor and organization while ensuring that everyone is engaged in working towards better outcomes and experiences for students, has a voice at the table, and is learning and working together.

**Glynis Schulters**, an Improvement Lead at Green Dot, overcame the challenge of “one-more-thing” by leaning into the heart of Green Dot’s culture to stay focused on a narrow set of priorities. After the Improvement

Team defined three key priorities during the summer—co-teaching, data systems, and Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)—the Green Dot Improvement Leads worked with Marshall Street’s Improvement Advisors to bring all three foci together under a shared Aim: *to increase the rate of students earning passing grades in grade level courses by providing rigorous and accessible instruction in a welcoming and caring environment.*

### RIGOROUS FOCUS ON CO-TEACHING AND PLANNING

Over the summer, the Green Dot Improvement Team learned that improving co-teaching in the virtual setting was a different task and in order to be successful would require more foresight, forethought, and foreplanning between co-teaching pairs. Put another way, co-teachers needed better ways to co-plan together. Responding to this learning, Glynis tested out the idea of facilitated co-planning days with select co-teaching pairs, creating intentional time and space for these teachers to plan and strategize together.

*“Please give us more co-plan days!”*

While work towards the Aim continues, early feedback on the impact of the Improvement Team’s work is promising.

This Fall, 100% of participants in Green Dot's facilitated co-planning days agreed or strongly agreed that their co-teacher relationship was enhanced, was a productive use of time, and that they would be interested in more co-planning days in the future. One teacher responded: "Please give us more co-plan days!!" This planning is essential to ensure that teachers deeply understand student needs and are able to target instruction that sets them up for success in class. "It is really nice," said another teacher, "just to have time to sit down and be purposeful."

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Most recently, in observation of Mr. **Justin Roane** and Ms. **Emily Ortega's** 9th grade English Language Arts (ELA) class at Animo Watts College Preparatory Academy, Area Superintendent Prentice noted evidence of close collaboration,



seamless transitions between facilitation, positive narration that emphasized growth mindsets, and multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery within a single class period.

Only two weeks earlier, the co-teaching pair had undergone a facilitated co-planning day with Glynis. After combing through student data, the co-teaching pair realized that one particular assignment was preventing a handful of high-attendance students from stronger class performance. In response, the pair designed multiple options for students to show mastery for the rest of the Fall semester. Next semester, they and other

co-teaching pairs will be watching for increased student engagement and performance.

Improvement Team members across the board recognize the challenges of virtual engagement and the fact that teachers' plates are already piled high. Despite these obstacles, the Green Dot team is aligned from senior leadership to teaching faculty on the continuous improvement approach to meeting the needs of diverse learners. Steered by Glynis's leadership and vision, the team is putting together all the pieces—data, professional development, curriculum, coaching, and communication—to make a real impact for students.



"Working with Glynis is a breath of fresh air," says Paula Espinoza, Improvement Advisor at Marshall Street Initiatives. "Her passion for creating a system that supports students comes through in every meeting. She is dedicated, knows Green Dot's culture, and is passionate about continuing to learn to make improvement to impact student outcomes." ■

*Daria Zhao writes from Marshall Street Initiatives, a K-12 solutions lab that tackles persistent challenges in American public education. Improvement Advisors Paula Espinoza and Stephanie Lassalle contributed to this story.*