

WINTER 2020

Passing the Baton: Lessons on Building an Improvement Team

Inside the story of how one network onboarded a new Improvement Lead in the middle of the year to ensure a strong start to the 2020-21 school year.



OAKLAND, CALIF.

It was early July, and **KIPP Northern California's Kevin MacPherson** could finally take a sigh of relief. After months of double duty, serving as both the Improvement Lead and Project Sponsor for KIPP NorCal's improvement efforts, the team welcomed a dedicated Improvement Lead to share the work of carrying the project forward. **Emily Isenberg's** arrival as the Improvement Lead signaled the beginning of a critical handoff for the KIPP team's leadership—and the start of a supportive and instructive relationship between Kevin and Emily.

Up until her start, Emily had been a lead Education Specialist at **KIPP San Francisco College Preparatory (SFCP)**, a focal site for the project, and was immersed in distance learning summer school instruction. Thinking back to those early days, Emily described the experience as "a mix of excitement and anticipation."

She was curious to jump into the project, but also anxious to catch up on what had already been done since the project's launch in January. Fortunately, says Emily, "Kevin didn't let my being new stop me from engaging in the work. Even as I had just come onboard for the summer Kickoff meetings, he had me lead parts of the meeting, and engage in small groups to share ideas and thoughts for action plans."

"It took me a while to get comfortable because I felt a bit of an imposter mindset, as if everybody knew a lot more about this area than me. Kevin and the Marshall Street team did a lot to build me up and support me to move beyond that mindset."

Over the summer, Emily and Kevin led planning meetings together, incorporating a variety of team voices and perspectives to craft KIPP's COVID-revised plans. With thoughtful mentoring and modeling provided by her Project Sponsor, Emily was positioned as a critical leader of priority initiatives for KIPP's diverse learner populations.

In addition to trust and responsibility, Kevin modeled good leadership for Emily by scaffolding Emily's onboarding experience so that she was empowered to take action. Once Emily identified some challenges in team alignment, she moved quickly to confront the problem. One school site engaged in the project (a "focal site") had not yet aligned their back-to-school plans with the Improvement Team's COVID-revised plans. Emily needed to find a path forward that ensured the school got what they needed while also ensuring that the KIPP network was able to achieve their broader goals for students with disabilities.

Leaning into the continuous improvement project was not easy, but Emily was not alone. Looking back on this period, Emily credits her success to existing relationships at focal school sites and her familiarity with the KIPP network.



A recent KIPP conversation with Marshall Street. Laughs, smiles, themes, and songs form the basis of authentic relationships that drive a complex, multi-year improvement project forward.

In fact, Emily didn't just survive the onboarding process; she thrived. She made it her own and revitalized the team's identity through laughter, team themes, walk-on songs, and authenticity.

Emily hit the ground running,” shares Kevin, who facilitated Emily’s onboarding with mentorship, modeling, and trust. “Emily is a relationship-first partner [who] uses her rich knowledge of special education programming to drive change in the KIPP high school community. It takes time, energy, and intentionality to drive a project of this size forward.”

LOOKING AHEAD

So what’s next? As the KIPP Improvement Team looks ahead to 2021, Emily has now fully stepped into the role of Improvement Lead. Her addition to the pilot community as an Improvement Lead serves as an exemplar for strategic onboarding, particularly the way she has blossomed in her role with an open mind to learning, feedback, and professional growth. Reflecting on the past half-year of her work as an Improvement Lead, Emily says:

“I can already see, hear, and feel the mindset shift that is happening across our team as we learn and continue this work together. It has not always been apparent how supporting our diverse learners is really engaging in antiracist work, and now we’re starting to see the connection between working to improve outcomes for our diverse learners and addressing the equity gaps in learning for all students, particularly our Black and Latino students.”



KIPP San Francisco College Preparatory Academy

As for Emily’s own words of advice for anyone new to leading continuous improvement efforts in education?

“Trust the process. Small tweaks and changes can be really effective. It was a monumental realization for me that we don’t need to overhaul everything: it’s the investigation of what is going well and what is not going well that helps us understand change ideas for improvement. It doesn’t make sense to cause action unless you really have an understanding of what you are taking action on.” ■

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Networked Improvement Community

FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES