**Kevin Dean Practicum Summary**

**Boston College Lynch School of Education - Spring 2014**

My 2013-2014 practicum took place at New Mission High School, a Boston Public School in Hyde Park, MA. New Mission is a pilot school, a distinction that grants it autonomy over budget, staffing, governance, curriculum/assessment, and the school calendar in order to best meet the needs of students and families. I reached out to Headmaster Naia Wilson in April of 2013 on the advice of a colleague and after researching the school. It was my intention to experience school leadership at an urban public (pilot) school that holds a mission with which I identify (college preparation and social justice) and one that practices distributed leadership. I began the practicum at the school’s June 2013 faculty retreat. My secondary placement was with Sturgis Public Charter School in Hyannis, MA, an International Baccalaureate public charter high school.

New Mission has a history of hosting school leader interns who traditionally manage a content team and serve on a variety of teams. My leadership project underwent a number of adjustments and variations throughout the course of the year, finally settling on a scope of work I undertook with New Mission’s ELA team. This work was focused on the school’s goals, as crafted by the Headmaster: raise SAT scores (Math and ELA) by 10% and improve students’ ability to analyze literature and non-fiction readings as evidenced by an increase of scores on the New Mission ELA Rubric. Both of these goals are vital to the school’s mission of preparing students for success in post-secondary education and increasing their ability to access these opportunities through competitive SAT scores.

I undertook three areas of work to accomplish these goals:

1. Design and carry out a lesson study to improve critical thinking and analytical writing

2. Design and carry out an ELA team cycle of inquiry that involved performing data analysis and pinpointing areas of targeted growth, carrying out instructional interventions and assessments to measure student progress, gathering data to determine growth, and analyzing data for areas of strength and weakness to inform subsequent work.

3. Perform a comprehensive analysis of PSAT data to establish strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for New Mission’s instructional leadership to use in understanding current performance and determining future work.

I feel that my work was successful in leading the English department to a deeper understanding of its effectiveness and areas in which improvement was necessary. The lesson study faced a number of hurdles from weather-related cancellations to a longer-than-planned process of designing and carrying out the study. The teachers' main takeaways were in understanding the necessity for cultivating critical thinking skills through relevant and engaging non-fiction readings coupled with literature. Teachers learned to assess student thinking through designing and observing critical thinking in active-learning lessons and to consider a variety of methods when assessing this skill. In addition, I have succeeded in working with the team to determine measurable goals and to use data in an effective and efficient way to assess areas in which teachers and students require further development and focus. Our cycles of inquiry focused on crafting assessments that would help provide us with the most accurate data possible to assess student needs and determine instructional interventions. Finally, my PSAT data analysis proved to be useful in that New Mission leadership has been struggling to determine a path forward for curriculum alignment and how to best approach the difficult work of raising scores and college competitiveness of its students. My work distilled areas where students were struggling, requiring teams to reflect on how their instruction impacts these results and how they can make adjustments to best address these areas of concern.

Throughout the year, I gained first-hand experience with the challenges involved in leading an urban school in a large school district. The primary takeaway has been around the importance of school leaders to set a clear and steady vision for teaching and learning and to develop this collaboratively with a focus on promoting teacher development, assessing student needs, and providing clear communication throughout the year. On multiple occasions, New Mission leadership has expressed how this year has been tumultuous and challenging for the school. I feel that a major reason for this has been the top-down approach school leadership has taken in the areas of instructional leadership and teacher performance. Teachers have expressed frustration (3 of 22 teachers have taken or been placed on extended leave) by the amount of changes they have been asked to make in their day-to-day instruction. From these experiences I understand the importance of setting direction and doing so collaboratively and with strong, clear communication; the necessity to be focused on developing people through capacity-building, problem-solving, and a clear moral sense of the work; the influence of organizational design to enable important work to be done and to help sustain improvement; and the management of the teaching and learning plan through impactful supervision and evaluation, providing useful and stimulating resources, and ensuring the hiring process reflects future goals and current school strengths.

I have learned that to enact school improvement, it is necessary for the school leader to prioritize this and devote the time necessary for visiting classes, observing and debriefing teachers, and coordinating support to advance the true work of the school. The headmaster excels in building community partnerships, working through district structures around hiring and budgeting, addressing student conflicts and coordinating support, and communicating the school’s mission. As a leader beginning my career, I hope to be strong in these areas and focus on cultivating community within the school and between families and the school. I know that my focus will be on teaching and learning and supporting good teachers become better teachers so that all students grow towards their potential. To do this, I must build collaborative structures and effective teams to empower teachers to grow and be solution-oriented.

I have discovered my fortitude in handling difficult conversations and holding teachers accountable for their performance. I have also understood the necessity to provide targeted and relevant support. In addition, I better understand the difficulties in managing change yet feel confident in sustaining improvement while balancing the variety of leadership duties in a school. Finally, I have witnessed a strong school culture and what maintaining this truly entails - a consistent embodiment of that mission reflected in my ability to allow that mission to speak through my judgment and decision-making process.

This has been a rewarding and illuminating experience and I am grateful for its many lessons.