

# Building Capacity to Improve Student Outcomes

## Case Study of a Partnership with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) is one of the 20 largest districts in the country, serving over 148,000 students with a staff of 9,400 teachers. Its student population is diverse, with students hailing from 183 countries, speaking 197 languages and dialects. It has drawn national recognition for honors such as the 2011 Broad Prize for Urban Education and consistently high scores on the NAEP. But like many other districts, CMS is still not satisfied with student outcomes (for example, with proficiency scores below 60% at several key grade levels), and has made it a priority to break the link between poverty and achievement gaps.

Since 2019, CMS has navigated several shifts in its instructional model and professional development approach—some strategic and intentional, some forced upon it by the global pandemic. Throughout that time, CMS has invested in rigorous curricula from Open Up Resources (OUR) and EL Education, and partnered with BetterLesson to provide teachers and leaders the in-depth, customized support they need via 1:1 coaching and action-oriented workshops. Working together, the district and its professional learning partners were able to adapt to three urgent instructional shifts and build capacity for the long term.



**“The mission of CMS is to create an innovative, inclusive, student-centered environment that supports the development of independent learners. The vision of CMS is to lead the community in educational excellence, inspiring intellectual curiosity, creativity, and achievement so that all students reach their full potential.”**

THE CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG BOARD OF EDUCATION, 2018

## Shift #1: Adopting a Rigorous, Student-Centered Curriculum Districtwide

SY 2019–20

In 2019, CMS announced its [2024 Strategic Plan](#), with two commitments and three goals:

### Commitments

**Equity** Each student's needs may be different, but those needs should be met at every school in CMS.

**Culture** Students, teachers, parents, families, staff, leaders, and partners work together to achieve.

### Goals

1. Every student graduates with meaningful employment or higher education opportunities.
2. Every student has access to a rich, diverse, and rigorous curriculum.
3. Every student has access to more social and emotional support.



One of the strategic actions CMS identified to support these goals is “Guarantee a viable curriculum for every student” because “[a] consistent K–12 curriculum supports clear expectations and outcomes.” While in the past each school chose its own curriculum, CMS leaders decided that the most equitable path forward was to select one, highly rigorous curriculum for all schools.

For middle school math, CMS selected OUR, for which the PD provider was BetterLesson. This was a welcome partnership, as BetterLesson had [supported](#) several Title 1 CMS elementary schools since 2016. In that school-based work, BetterLesson provided 1:1 coaching to help teachers shift to more student-centered practices and to differentiate instruction. **Over 90% of the teachers who responded to a follow-up survey said they would recommend BetterLesson coaching to a peer.** All schools achieved measurable growth in student achievement—including one that observed double-digit growth on math and reading scores for students whose teachers were coached by BetterLesson.

However, adopting a new, highly rigorous curriculum district wide was an entirely different task. It required not just content expertise and an effective professional development model, but a change management approach that was sensitive to each school's needs.

From the fall of 2019 through February 2020, BetterLesson facilitated seven full-day, in-person "Design Workshops" for 250 8th grade math teachers, three full-day onsite coaching experiences for district math specialists, and two Virtual Workshops for middle school math teachers, designed to introduce the new curriculum and build fluency with it. **Each experience included time for teachers to unpack standards, explore strategies, and create plans for implementing the curriculum in their classrooms.**

BetterLesson coaches also worked with two district specialists to hone their instructional leadership skills, such as running effective PLCs, observing instruction and giving feedback, and maintaining teacher communication systems.

CMS leaders and teachers soon saw the value of bringing together teachers from across schools to learn about one curriculum. **80% of participants in the OUR workshops said they were moderately to extremely confident that they could implement what they learned in the sessions.** The district was on track to a successful first year of curriculum adoption.

**80%**

**OF PARTICIPANTS**

**in the OUR workshops said they were moderately to extremely confident that they could implement what they learned in the sessions.**

## What is one thing that you're taking away from this experience that you're excited to implement in your practice?

*CMS teacher responses from post-event survey for a Design Workshop, Nov. 2019*

“

I'm able to see the coherence in each standard.

“

The strategic planner.

“

Better understanding of Math Language Routines (MLR).



“

## Shift #2: Adapting to Distance Learning During the Pandemic

SPRING 2020

In the middle of March 2020, the whole world changed. Schools across the country closed suddenly due to the spreading COVID-19 pandemic. CMS administrators and teachers worked feverishly to adapt to an entirely new remote learning model and ensure that all students had [device and Wi-Fi access](#).

CMS's leaders and BetterLesson collaborated to shift their focus from curriculum adoption toward supporting teachers with “flexible learning”—meaning that schools meet students where they are—academically, social-emotionally, and physically, whether that's in distance learning, hybrid, or in person.

Feedback was through-the-roof positive...folks have started saying, ‘If it's BetterLesson, it's going to be good.’

BETH THOMPSON  
Assistant Superintendent  
for Academics



CMS' PD support staff were swamped with helping about 8,000 of the district's approximately 10,000 teachers learn how to use their Learning Management System (LMS), Canvas. But about 2,000 were using Canvas already, and primarily needed guidance on how to deliver high-quality remote instruction. BetterLesson coaches and learning designers had a long track record of providing virtual PD, and thus had a stable of strategies to share regarding effective virtual instruction.

Within less than a week, BetterLesson arranged to offer a Virtual Workshop covering the fundamentals of remote learning. Virtual Workshops are delivered in a small-group format (i.e., with a ratio of 1:20 facilitators to participants) and built around the same hands-on, collaborative, inquiry-based model of in-person Design Workshops. In **“Student-Centered Culture: Building Community at a Distance,”** teachers learned how to create a safe and inclusive culture online, as well as how to foster student participation. On the first day it was offered, five teachers signed up for the 8am session. But word quickly spread, and by the 1pm session 141 teachers had participated.



**“I think there was this sense of panic and uncertainty—did we ever think a pandemic was going to happen? The ability for us to say, ‘Come one, come all, if you need help and want to learn, you can come’—that was crucial.”**

**BETH THOMPSON, Assistant Superintendent for Academics**

Over three days, 400-plus teachers joined that Virtual Workshop, with another 400-plus attending Workshops offered in April and May. When asked how likely participants were to recommend the PD to a colleague on a scale of 1–10, the average answer was 9. **In response to surveys sent about six weeks after the sessions, 95% of participants said that they had implemented or were planning to implement a strategy they learned, with 90% saying it went moderately to extremely well.** Throughout the spring, BetterLesson worked closely with CMS leadership to develop and lead additional workshops related to “flexible learning” strategies, including:

- Choosing and setting up an online learning environment, like an LMS
- Structuring learning time
- Designing synchronous and asynchronous learning tasks
- Addressing equity issues
- Scaffolding instruction to meet all students’ needs

BetterLesson and CMS also decided to offer a Virtual Workshop for leaders, focused on creating strategic plans to “lead through change.” Those sessions, too, quickly hit their registration capacity as leaders were eager for support in navigating an unprecedented reality.

## Participant Feedback on the Spring 2020 Distance Learning PD

“

This Distance Learning PD has been a breakthrough of knowledge for me. I’m now equipped with the resources to empower students, families, and staff.

**MEDIA COORDINATOR**

“

This is the most I have learned from a PD thus far. I had access to so many useful resources and the time and support to learn how to use them.

**TEACHER**

“

This session was exactly what I needed to get back on track with setting goals and creating next steps.

**INSTRUCTIONAL COACH**

**95%**

**OF PARTICIPANTS** said that they had implemented or were planning to implement a strategy they learned, with 90% saying it went moderately to extremely well.

**“[BetterLesson] worked closely with us to take our existing scope of work and morph it according to our needs. That speaks volumes to our partnership and their willingness to be nimble alongside us to provide opportunities for teachers.”**

**BETH THOMPSON, Assistant Superintendent for Academics**

CMS leaders and their BetterLesson partners worked together to quickly adapt to an unprecedented shift in instructional models. CMS leaders reported being pleased that BetterLesson was able to customize their PD support to meet CMS’s needs. It was becoming clear that having a long-term professional learning partner who knew the district’s context, goals, and capacities was beneficial to building a flexible and sustainable approach to educator professional learning.

### **Shift #3: Building Even Deeper Instructional Leadership**

**SUMMER & FALL 2020, & BEYOND**

Before the pandemic hit, CMS had decided to make yet another shift: to focus on growing its internal capacity for instructional leadership. This meant that CMS would take over all training and support for teachers, but would work with outside experts to support its district specialists, school leaders, and district administrators. This strategy would reduce dependency on outside talent, create greater alignment across the district, and form the path to a robust, long-term educator growth strategy that would fulfill CMS’s promise in the 2024 Strategic Plan to “support teachers with development and learning equal to performance expectations.”

In the summer of 2020, CMS and BetterLesson partnered to deliver a robust PD opportunity to help CMS principals prepare for the coming school year. **All principals were required to attend “Teaching and Learning Flexibly: Best Practices and Big Ideas” and could choose two other sessions that aligned to their individual contexts and school needs.** (See sidebar for topics). CMS principals also had the opportunity to sign up for four sessions of coaching (or “consultation,” as leadership coaching is often called), to give them a space to workshop problems and create back-to-school plans.

Overall, 113 principals participated in consultations, focused on creating flexible PD, promoting best practices for remote learning, and supporting staff and students’ social-emotional needs. Some of the most popular strategies that principals covered with coaches include:

- [Create a Define-Explore-Build Workshop](#)
- [Self-Regulation Strategies](#)
- [Marzano’s Self Assessment Rubric](#)
- [Learning Walks: A Tool for Administrators to Take the Temperature of Learning](#)



#### **BETTERLESSON VIRTUAL WORKSHOPS FOR PRINCIPALS**

**Equity Lens:** Ensuring Access and Prioritizing Needs

**Strategic Planning:** Building Awareness Around Key Shifts

**Strategic Planning:** Goals and Objectives of an Instructional Plan

**Communicating Your Strategic Vision:** Getting Everyone on the Bus Effectively

**Assessing Progress:** Checking In on Learning

**Caretaker Connections:** Communication and Partnership with Families

**Mindfulness:** Meeting the Emotional Needs of Your Team

In 5 out of the 6 Virtual Workshops offered, more than 80% of participants reported being very or extremely satisfied with the delivery and support provided, and the majority reported being very or extremely confident in implementing what they had learned. Based on their positive experiences over the summer, several school leaders opted to use discretionary funds to continue personalized coaching in the next school year.

## Participant Feedback from Summer 2020 Principal Support



In 2020–21, the focus of the partnership has shifted to supporting district curriculum specialists, in order to continue building capacity around the relatively new, rigorous curricula (OUR Math and EL Education, the new ELA curriculum), build instructional leadership skills, and do so in the context of the new remote and hybrid learning models.

Over the course of this school year, 28 district specialists are participating in biweekly, 30-minute, 1:1 virtual coaching sessions coupled with a series of Virtual Workshops on topics like:

- Deep dives into the EL and OUR curricula, as well as other ELA and math curricula used at the high school level
- Foundations of Coaching
- Facilitating Collaborative Professional Learning
- Actionable Feedback and Observation
- Supporting Strategic Planning at the Unit, Lesson, and Task Level

For the Workshops delivered in the fall of 2020, participants reported an average 9.3 out of 10 in response to whether they would recommend the PD to a colleague, with 75% saying they are very or extremely confident in their ability to implement what they learned. In post-Workshop surveys, participants often report that they plan to follow up on a new strategy or resource with their coach—thus creating a cycle of introduction to new material, followed by individualized coaching to answer questions, adapt approaches, practice, and reflect on progress. This job-embedded, virtual PD support system thus also provides a model for how specialists can work with teachers.

## A Leadership Coaching Story

BetterLesson coach Kim Penn started working with Mallory in the fall of 2020. As a district-level specialist in elementary math, Mallory was responsible for supporting a group of school-level instructional coaches, called “facilitators.” The facilitators needed to coach their teachers on using small-group instruction with students—which was a school priority, especially during remote instruction.

In the Virtual Workshop “Foundations of Coaching,” Mallory learned about the [GROW model](#)—a process for setting goals, identifying obstacles, and crafting a plan. Kim helped Mallory apply GROW with her facilitators, which in turn helped them “chunk” their PD approach so that teachers could grapple with one new teaching strategy at a time. Facilitators reported great results, as they saw teachers applying the new small-group strategies right away. Kim helped Mallory grow her confidence in her leadership role, and imparted meaningful strategies for facilitating collaborative PD.

## The Value of Partnership

CMS, like every district, has evolved its approach to instructional excellence. From BetterLesson’s early days of working with individual schools, to the districtwide partnership to adopt a new curriculum, adapt to a new teaching model, or build instructional leadership, the district and BetterLesson have collaborated more and more to focus on the big picture of what teachers and leaders need. They continue to work together to responsively meet every new challenge so that every school has a great curriculum and supports for teachers, leaders, and ultimately—students.

### “What’s one thing you are taking away from this experience?”

*CMS specialist responses from post-Workshop surveys, Fall 2021*







BetterLesson provides 1:1 virtual coaching and small group high-quality professional learning focused on supporting educators to create classrooms where students drive their own learning, exercise choice and ownership, and develop the personal agency they need to succeed. We provide job-embedded support across a wide range of topics including instructional leadership, student engagement, responsive and inclusive practices, innovative models & remote learning, and curriculum and academic content.

We have partnered with more than 30,000 educators across 47 states plus D.C., Puerto Rico and 5 countries internationally. BetterLesson's free Lab site with a continuously growing library of evidence-based strategies has a total of almost 2 million users with an average monthly user total of more than 500,000.

BetterLesson values the pursuit of educational equity and is dedicated to ensuring every student—regardless of race, income, national origin, gender identity, ability, or location —has access to an excellent education.

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