

# Grade-Level Point People

## A Group of Greatness

by Marietta P. Lachenauer

**T**hroughout my 15 years in school administration, I continue to realize how much I still have to learn each year. For the past eight years, I have served as the director of special education in the Westhill Central School District, a small district in Syracuse, New York. As in many districts, our students' needs continue to shift, requiring ongoing professional development and coaching for our staff.

I am pleased to share that staff turnover has remained low throughout my tenure. Generally, when staff members do leave the district, it is due to changing family dynamics or a decision to pursue advanced education. Notably, several of our teaching assistants have chosen to earn their teaching certifications following their experiences in our district, with some even returning to join our faculty as teachers. Retaining dedicated staff is essential for our program's growth and ensures that our students' diverse needs are consistently met.

Despite my experience, I am constantly learning and evolving. Each year, I collaborate with teams to identify critical needs, establish meaningful goals, and refine our instructional practices. I've discovered that true program success is shaped by collective input, and through this collaborative process, I have developed a core set of effective strategies and practices that I rely on year after year.



## Team Leaders Are Paramount to Success

I collaborate closely with three dedicated team leaders — one from each academic level (elementary, middle, and high school) — through quarterly leadership meetings. This team of teacher leaders is instrumental in identifying departmental needs, setting priorities, and developing cross-departmental protocols. Over the past two years, this collaboration has led to significant process improvements, including creating district-wide tools for data tracking for students with teaching assistants and streamlining the teaching assistant request process for greater efficiency. We plan to evaluate these two years of work next school year, using staff feedback to inform revisions. Just as we emphasize providing students with clear, explicit instruction and defined proficiency standards, our staff deserve the same approach to outlining expectations. When expectations are clear, staff can meet and exceed them, ultimately resulting in a better learning environment for our students. By prioritizing the voices of our teacher leaders and ensuring that expectations remain transparent and clearly defined, this collaborative model serves as an essential pillar in fostering long-term staff satisfaction and retention.

## Respect the Requests of Staff

Over the past eight years, the speech team has expanded considerably, growing from approximately four full-time positions in 2017 to an anticipated 6.25 next year. While therapists once primarily addressed articulation and basic language needs, their current roles encompass a fuller range of responsibilities, including speech improvement sessions, direct services, and collaborative work. This shift in service delivery includes the increased utilization of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices, which necessitates that our therapists possess advanced facility with these technologies and require significant ongoing professional development. Consequently, we have needed to rethink our approach to professional learning and redesign the methods used to cross-train paraprofessionals. Crucially, this evolution has been guided by the direct input of the speech therapy team, who prioritized their needs and developed a comprehensive plan to revise both evaluative and instructional approaches. As the instructional leader of the Special Education Department, my primary goal remains to support teams by facilitating the identification of their specific needs, encouraging plans for growth, and offering clear avenues for professional development.

By prioritizing dedicated collaboration time throughout the academic year and offering substantive, timely feedback, we have cultivated a culture of professional efficacy. We collectively established that quarterly half-day sessions, augmented by strategic professional development days, provide the necessary space for meaningful discourse and targeted support. This approach has allowed the team to

refine their strategic goals, identify specific professional learning needs, and celebrate significant milestones.

Throughout this journey, I have remained committed to providing the requisite resources and professional development opportunities to ensure their plan's successful implementation. As we conclude the school year, the team has successfully developed a cohesive framework, one that reflects their shared commitment and collective ownership. Their ongoing reflections, evidence-based practices, and identified areas for future inquiry underscore a profound dedication to professional growth and, ultimately, the success of our department.

## Cultivating a Trauma-Informed Community Through TCIS

Approximately five years ago, our department identified a critical need to deepen our collective understanding of student behavior and enhance our capacity to support children experiencing crisis. While the district had previously engaged with the Therapeutic Crisis Intervention for Schools (TCIS) framework developed by Cornell University, direct instruction had gradually waned over time. In response, a multidisciplinary core of dedicated professionals — comprising special education staff, social workers, and school psychologists — committed to becoming our internal TCIS Training Team. By completing a rigorous five-day train-the-trainer program through our local BOCES, they became certified trainers, revitalizing our ability to provide high-quality, in-house support. Our initial cohorts were small, primarily attracting

educators already familiar with the foundational principles of TCIS who sought to refine their practice.

Although the global pandemic temporarily interrupted our ability to facilitate in-person training, it unexpectedly provided a window to expose a broader cross-section of special education providers and teaching assistants to essential TCIS concepts. This period of remote reflection catalyzed a district-wide interest, leading to a significant increase in staff members from all disciplines expressing a desire for formal certification. Over the past three years, our training team has continued to evolve and expand; we have intentionally integrated paraprofessional staff as trainers and are actively seeking to include general education colleagues to ensure a holistic approach. To date, we have trained more than 100 staff members — including general and special educators, as well as our transportation team — in a district of approximately 330 employees.

We strive to provide responsive, relevant training that directly addresses the complex social-emotional needs of our students, fostering a safe and regulated learning environment for everyone. Our commitment to the TCIS framework provides our staff with a shared language and a trauma-informed lens through which to view childhood development. This common understanding empowers our team to support students effectively, both during routine instruction and in moments of acute crisis. By regularly evaluating our progress through staff feedback and data analysis, we ensure that our coaching remains effective, compassionate, and aligned with the evolving needs of our school community.

## I Am Not the Smartest Person in the Room

I have learned time and again that I am far from the smartest person in the room and my experience has consistently reaffirmed that the professionals who work directly with students are the experts in what they need. Just as my role in the classroom focused on facilitating learning, my charge as an instructional leader is to foster staff and departmental growth, ultimately driving enhanced student outcomes. There is an adage that staff “don’t leave jobs, they leave bad managers.” To maintain a genuinely student-centered approach, I prioritize empowering the professionals who interact directly with students daily, ensuring they have the requisite support to achieve excellence. In high school CSE meetings, I often describe my role to students as being “the person who helps your teachers do their job.” The success and cohesiveness of our department are a source of considerable pride, serving as a direct testament to the caliber of professionals with whom I collaborate daily. This commitment is evidenced even as I write this: a cross-section of staff, dedicated to the work, are departing the building after completing this evening’s two-hour TCIS refresher training session. They value the work we do and have stayed late to hone their skills. Ultimately, staff retention is inextricably linked to the dedication instructional leaders commit to enabling our educational professionals to achieve their objectives. Their expertise must be valued, their leadership must drive departmental progress, and our primary function must be to empower their essential work. ■