



# Leadership

in Blended and Digital Learning

Building Principal Capacity



IMPLEMENTATION STORIES: RHODE ISLAND

Leadership Lessons, Successes and Challenges | October 2016

By Barbara Treacy

**O**n one of the first sunny weeknights in May, when school days and nights are packed with multiple end-of-the-year activities and meetings, a group of more than 20 principals and other school leaders from across Rhode Island took time from their busy schedules to gather at the Shriners’ Hall in Cranston, RI to discuss successes, challenges, lessons and next steps in leading blending learning in their schools. Colleen Mercurio, Principal, Cedar Hill Elementary in Warwick, kicked off the discussion to say “I’m excited, I’m rejuvenated, I’m modeling, I’m sharing and we’re learning together with the teachers”. Nicole L’Etoile, Assistant principal, W. Warwick High School, agreed, adding, “I’m really proud of the collaboration – teachers are opening their doors and they are sharing practices and that’s been a big success”. As each principal, assistant principal and district leader reflected on their year of participation in the Leadership in Blended and Digital Learning Program, they collectively described a year of excitement, experimentation, engagement, learning and collaboration in each of their schools and across the state.

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–Colleen Mercurio, Principal,  
Cedar Hill Elementary in Warwick

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[Leadership in Blended and Digital Learning](#) is a capacity-building, blended professional development program developed by the [Friday Institute for Educational Innovation based at North Carolina State University](#), with initial funding from [The Learning Accelerator](#)<sup>1</sup>, an organization focused on transforming American K-12 education on a national scale. The Friday Institute conducts research, develops educational resources, provides professional development programs for educators, advocates to improve teaching and learning, and helps inform policy-making.

Leadership in Blended and Digital Learning (LBDL) is a unique, blended professional learning program, designed specifically to support school leaders in the transition to blended and digital learning. The Rhode Island Association of School Principals (RIASP) was one of six organizations selected to participate in the initial national LBDL pilot. A team of five Rhode Island school leaders were selected by RIASP to be trained by the Friday Institute to facilitate the LBDL program for Rhode Island principals, assistant principals and other school leaders.



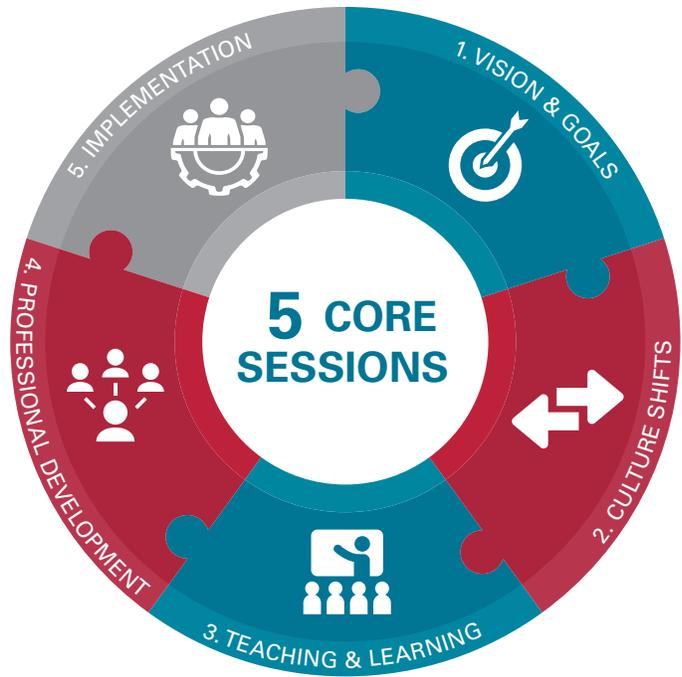
RIASP Facilitation Team at Friday Institute Facilitator Training

1 For more information about The Learning Accelerator, go to <http://learningaccelerator.org/>

The LBDL program includes five core sessions which combine online and face-to-face components and address: (1) vision and goals, (2) culture shifts, (3) teaching and learning, (4) professional development and (5) implementation. The facilitated program focuses on building a strong learning community among the participants, with time for reflection built in during and between each session. The program includes a strong emphasis on planning – participants are supported during each session and throughout the program as they work on their own personal “RoadMap” to guide their school-based blended learning plans.

A cohort of 35 Rhode Island leaders were selected from over 80 applicants to participate in initial RIASP program, with all areas of the state represented including Rhode Island’s largest cities of Providence and Warwick, as well as Rhode Island’s more suburban districts and smaller rural districts. In total, the school districts represented by the principals include well over 1000 classrooms and 30,000 students.

The facilitation team, a cross section of highly regarded Rhode Island leaders includes: Jessie Butash, Cumberland High School Assistant Principal; Mike Hobin, Coventry High School Principal; Lynne Burke, Coventry Schools Technology Director; Steve Ruscito, Warwick Schools Director of Secondary Education and former Middletown High School Principal; and James Williamson, North Smithfield Middle School Assistant Principal. Mike Hobin is a former Rhode Island Principal of the Year, and both Jessie Butash and Lynne Burke are Highlander Institute FUSE RI Fellows.<sup>2</sup> Carol Bissanti, RIASP staff, provided crucial organizational and logistical support for the facilitation team and course participants. Highlander Institute was a core partner working with RIASP to get the program off the ground with support from the Rhode Island Foundation, which provided funding for travel to the facilitator training and program meetings. Dana Borrelli-Murray, Executive Director of the Highlander Institute, shared her congratulations and support for continuing the program at the reunion meeting, and other Highlander Institute staff attended prior sessions. Holly Walsh, Rhode Island Department of Education, also supported the LBDL-RI training sessions.



**AT-A-GLANCE**

**35**   
Rhode Island Leaders

Representing

**1K+**   
Classrooms

**30K+**   
Students

<sup>2</sup> Fuse RI ([fuseri.highlanderinstitute.org](https://fuseri.highlanderinstitute.org)) is Highlander Institute’s comprehensive, systems change work to ignite education through blended learning.



As the principals shared their successes, challenges and ideas for next steps at the reunion meeting, several key themes emerged, reflecting the ongoing efforts in school buildings, districts and across the state.

## LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES

### *Strong Emphasis Ongoing Adult Learning*

One of the most important successes of the LBDL course was it provided protected time for Rhode Island school leaders to come together regularly to discuss issues of leadership and digital learning and to ground their efforts with a strong theoretical foundation. Nicole L’Etoile, West Warwick High School Assistant Principal described how “the course is the glue, the foundation, the roadmap”. Assistant Principal L’Etoile explained that “things would happen without the course, but they wouldn’t happen as strategically or as intentional. The course presents it clearly and it accelerates our timeline; brings it a little deeper”.



The focus on adult learning in LBDL schools was a strong theme during the “reunion meeting”, with Mike Hobin, LBDL facilitator and others underscoring the impact of the course on strengthening the culture of adult learning in their schools. At Providence’s West Broadway Middle School, where 95% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, Principal Bill Black (recently named RIASP First Year Principal of the Year) and Assistant Principal Mike Comella worked with teachers who initiated monthly “appy hours” to share classroom tools - a low/no-cost way to build their culture of adult learning.

At West Warwick High School, another sign of change is that traditional faculty meetings are now gone and have been replaced by teacher led professional development. Assistant Principal Nicole L’Etoile said that “people are begging to keep this style going”. The course also encouraged principals to use social media to learn and share on an ongoing basis. Many principals echoed the following sentiment, shared by one participant in the course feedback, “I am online much more (Twitter) with colleagues sharing best practices and professional articles on Blended Learning. I have more staff engaged in the innovative work and feel they truly see me as a learner as well in this new practice”.

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–Nicole L’Etoile, Assistant principal,  
W. Warwick High School

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### **Focus on Modeling and Job-Embedded Professional Learning**

One of the hallmarks of the success of the LBDL course was that job-embedded modeling was built into the program. Each session incorporated effective uses of blended strategies and technology tools, customized and enhanced by the creative LBDL-RIASP facilitators. Principals were able to learn new skills and strategies, and then go back to their schools and try out the practices in their schools. Mike Comella, West Broadway Middle School Assistant Principal, along with West Broadway Principal Bill Black, described how “one of the things Bill and I do is we’ve been able to go to a session and then come back and then almost immediately take two or three things from the session and begin to implement or use it to help structure something.” Bill Black added that they would “take the videos we’ve gotten from the program and put it in our Friday Focus” (a staff newsletter).



Principals were able to replicate the focus on modeling in the LBDL training and incorporate it into in their practice in their schools. The carefully structured sessions were crafted to allow principals to experience what it is like to be a learner in a personalized environment. The importance of personalization was realized by principals, giving them the drive and tools to champion the approach in their own schools. Principal Colleen Mercurio, in

describing the value of the LBDL sessions observed that “when I go to that group of people it’s reflective. I’m learning something as an actual skill. Because they differentiate for each one of us, we can pick what we want and use it. I’m modeling strategies.” As Principal Mercurio incorporates the new skills she’s learning, there is tangible impact in her school, as she notes that “my newsletters are so much more efficient now” since they are now developed using the new digital skills she’s acquired in the course.

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–Colleen Mercurio, Principal, Cedar Hill Elementary in Warwick School District



***Foster an Open, Collaborative, Trusting Culture***

Nearly all the LBDL-RI participants described the importance of creating an open, collaborative culture where risk-taking is encouraged and teachers feel supported by their leadership. Colleen Mercurio, Principal of Cedar Hill Elementary in Warwick School District described the cultural changes she’s seeing in her school this year, where teachers “are opening their classroom doors; they are sharing”.

Principal Mercurio talked about working hard to establish a culture where it’s safe to make a mistake. Cedar Hill teachers are noticing and appreciate this risk-taking culture. One of lead blended learning teachers shared, “Colleen makes it easy for us because she knows that it’s not going to work every day. We feel more confident to try it. OK it’s a work in progress. We feel safe.” Principal Mercurio was proud that it is so safe, that a number of teachers who were just moving to blended learning opted to incorporate blended learning in the class they used for their formal evaluation.

Similarly, in West Broadway Middle, fifth grade teacher Rachel Salvatore, described how there is strong administrative support to try new things and see what works. Mike Comella, Assistant Principal confirmed that “the only repercussion is thank you for trying”.

*The only repercussion is thank you for trying.*

–Mike Cornelia, Assistant Principal, West Broadway Middle School



These results are aligned with the “Shifting Culture” session in the Leadership in Blended and Digital Learning course. Lynne Burke, LBDL facilitator and Technology Director at Coventry School District, describes why the course’s focus on culture is so important for the Rhode Island principals. “We’re always working at culture, that never goes away, but when you learn a different set of pedagogical strategies and different learning needs for kids based on 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, your culture has to be redefined”.

### **Create opportunities to see blended learning in practice**

Principals recognized that having a collaborative culture enabled good ideas to spread quickly throughout a building, providing teachers with concrete examples of what blended learning looks like in practice. In West Broadway Middle, teachers can sign up to invite colleagues to visit their classrooms and/or to visit their colleagues’ classrooms. In West Warwick High School, Assistant Principal L’Etoile described how some classrooms are almost becoming “lab classrooms”, where teachers can visit their colleagues to get ideas and see blended learning in action. For example, one teacher observed a colleague implementing EdPuzzle to support their lesson. After trying it out in her own classroom, she has now agreed to present this strategy at the teacher-led professional development in her building. New teacher leadership is being fostered in the school from the ground up as teachers learn from each other.

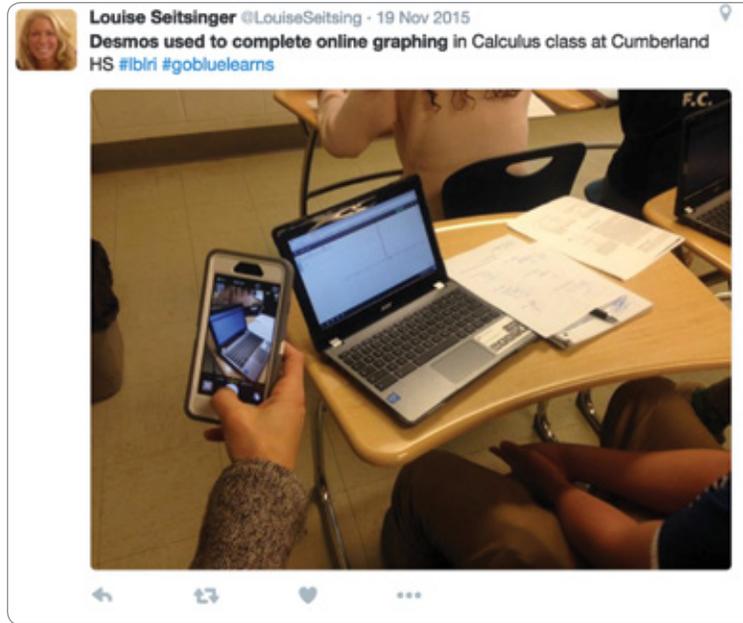
Classroom visits were also directly incorporated into the LBDL training in Rhode Island, to help participants learn, and to model this practice for participants. One of the face to face sessions included a tour of Cumberland High School, where Jessie Butash, LBDL facilitator serves as an Assistant Principal of Teaching and Learning. This tour was a significant highlight of the program for many of the participants. As one of the participants shared, “I was very excited to be able to go into classrooms and see blended learning in action.” Butash noted, “Classroom visits supported the culture being built at Cumberland High School. Teachers took a professional risk by opening their doors to visitors and the positive comments and appreciation of their efforts by leaders state-wide helped to validate their hard work.”

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–Lynne Burke, LBDL facilitator and Technology Director, Coventry School District

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## IMPLEMENTATION SUCCESSES

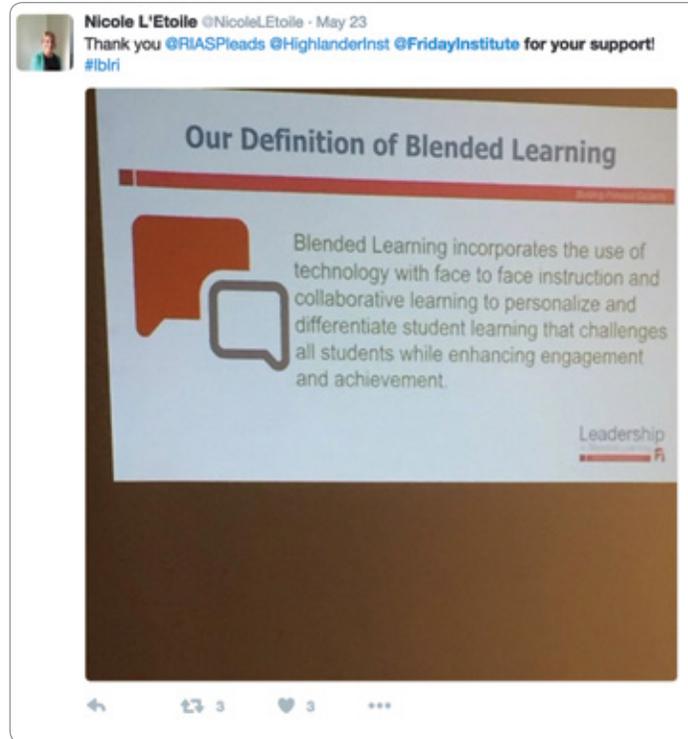
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### ***Development of a Vision and Plan***

A key focus of the LBDL training is developing a vision for blended learning that aligns with school goals and priorities. The LBDL team engaged participants in an interactive activity during one of the face-to-face meetings to create a common definition of blended learning, based on readings and explorations they completed during the online pre-work. The LBDL - RIASP cohort came up with the following definition:

“ *Blended Learning incorporates the use of technology with face to face instruction and collaborative learning to personalize and differentiate student learning that challenges all students while enhancing engagement and achievement.* ”

The reunion meeting provided an opportunity for participants to review their definition and reflect as a cohort on where they had been and where they are going.



In addition to defining blended learning and developing a vision at the start of the training, the work on a school-based “RoadMap” for blended learning was reinforced in all five sessions of the course. The RoadMap served as both a planning document as well as an ongoing place for leaders to capture their reflections about key issues and learnings. Assistant Principal L’Etoile emphasized the importance of the RoadMap for the successful work at her school. “We were able to share it. That was a huge success for me to bring back to the school... It took the teachers and the group that was working strong on this to the next level, so I really appreciated having that conversation and listening to everyone else about what they were going to do.”

### **Increased engagement**

A recurring theme at the LBDL Rhode Island reunion meeting was the principals’ pride in the increased engagement at all levels of their schools – students, teachers, parents and administrators. Some of the participants described the new “buzz” in their schools; others described how more teachers “jumping in” to get involved or try new things.

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*...in every way possible to have our learning in the building be more active than passive... Teachers are diving into that this year.*

–Alan Tenreiro, Principal,  
Cumberland High School

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Cumberland teachers talked about the impact of being connected with their students via Google classroom, which students used to reach out for questions and feedback on a regular basis. One of the Cumberland Middle School students talked about this year’s improvements connecting her to her teacher through email and Google classroom, sharing, “it’s also better because if you have a question or something, you don’t have to wait til the next day to ask him”. Cumberland High School Principal Alan Tenreiro explained this emphasis on active learning and extending the classroom outside of school is all part of “the broad vision to in every way possible to have our learning in the building be more active than passive and to have some of that of necessity be met at home. Teachers are diving into that this year”.

At the same time, Rhode Island facilitators and participants talked about the importance of making sure the focus is on content and learning, and not the technology. Both principals and teachers stressed the importance of providing training in digital literacy as the technology is rolled out and remaining vigilant that all students stay on task. Teachers recognized that consistent digital citizenship and responsible use policies within a school, reinforced across all classrooms, enables problems to be kept to a minimum.

### **Growth of personalized learning**

Many principals and teachers talked about the opportunity to differentiate and personalize learning for their students in ways that had not been possible without blended and digital learning. Rachel Salvatore, fifth grade teacher at West Broadway Middle School started implementing a station rotation model in her math classroom and shared the difference blended learning has meant in her classroom,

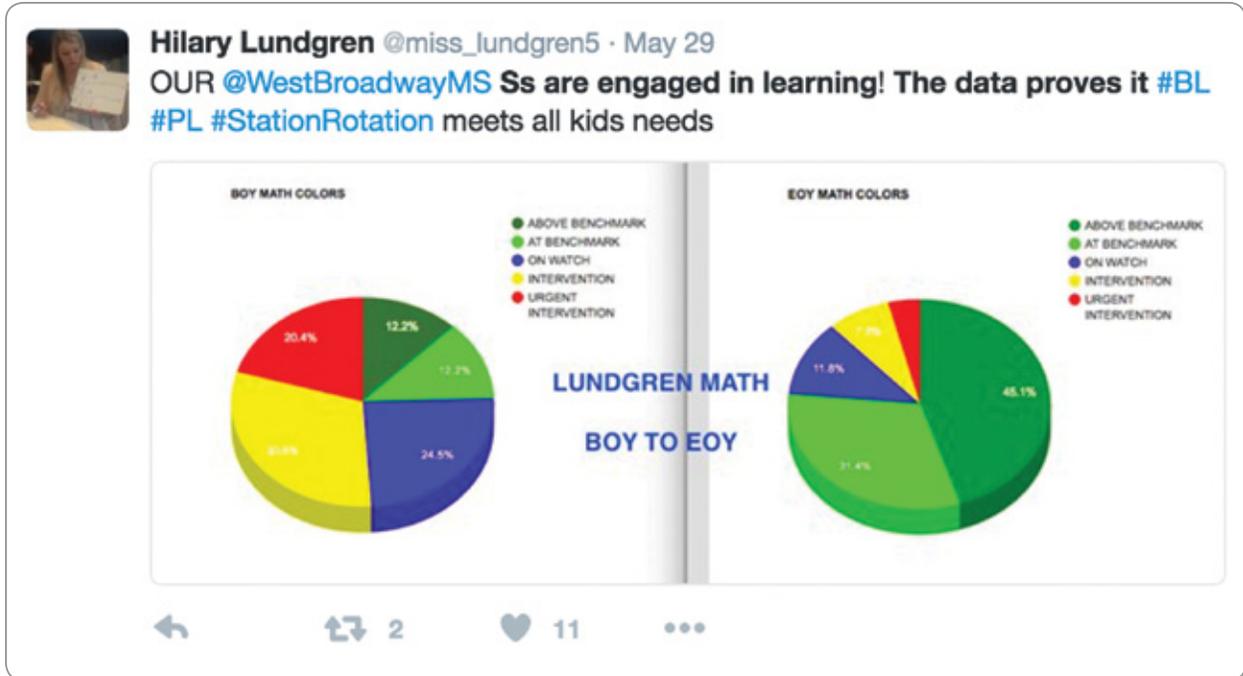
*This is my 19th year of teaching and this year is the best I've ever taught. I always worked hard but now I work so much smarter. It's so exciting because I know all kids are learning. In the past I was always successful, I always moved my lower kids, but now we're moving all of the kids....I have two groups in each of my classes that are solving quadratic equations thanks to blended learning because if I didn't have that opportunity, it would just be a whole class instruction. Blended learning takes all that away.*

Rachel talked about the importance of the increased access to student data enabled through blended learning, which allows her to target instruction to what her students need. Hilary Lundgren, a new teacher at West Broadway who is collaborating with Ms. Salvatore, explained how they plan their math stations each day. "We have three separate stations and we can vary the minutes we spend on direct instruction in homogeneous groups of kids. We're grouping very frequently and regrouping based on that data."

Ms. Lundgren emphasized that while they are using math software in the classroom, the most important thing is the increased opportunity to get to know her students and work with them directly on what they need. Ms. Lundgren shared, "blended learning to me is that face to face instruction time is so important. It's not just putting kids in front of a computer. When our kids are sitting in front a computer, it's all personalized, so they know exactly what skill they are supposed to be working on. Same as for direct instruction time. The timing is flexible. If we're sitting in front of a group and they are not getting it, we're going to keep them for a longer period of time."

Cesar, one of Ms. Salvatore's fifth grade students talked about how much he liked the new blended learning model he's experiencing in her class, sharing,

*It's being better this year because last year we were only with the teacher but now this year we can be independent ...I like that we can be on our own. If you're with the teacher the whole time, you probably won't get as much knowledge as you usually would if you did blended learning...When I was littler I didn't like school but now I'm starting to like school a lot more.*



**Expanded Leadership Capacity within schools and across the state**

One of the key benefits of being in the RIASP LBDL cohort was the opportunity to strengthen connections with other principals across the state. As Bill Black, West Broadway Middle School Principal said,

*For me, I think it's great to hear from other schools and other principals...it's just good to know there's a foundation out there...it's kind of given me confidence because when you go in and you know, you're a first, second year principal now, but you're hearing from other principals and their struggles and the way the program has been set up, it's just been very honest and transparent.*

Another principal concurred about the importance of building a statewide leadership network through the cohort, sharing, "I look forward to seeing the same people. I like the fact that it was across the state. That was important to me."

In Coventry, Lynne Burke, LBDL facilitator and Coventry District Technology Coordinator, has taken the LBDL material and built in-district trainings based directly on these materials. Dr. Burke also built a customized [LBDL/RIASP website](#) to support principals as they use the course materials in their buildings, share resources and build their community. The website is also open for others to access and use the materials. Principal Mercurio talked about how important the website has been for her learning, noting that "having the LBDL website with a wide variety of resources readily accessible is an extremely valuable tool in helping me as a school administrator to start implementing Blended Learning within the school setting."

**Next session - Thursday, November 19th @ Cumberland High School - see info below**

The Leadership in Blended Learning (LBDL) program developed by the Friday Institute at NC State University offers a job-embedded professional learning experience to prepare you to lead a blended learning transition in your school. As a participant in the program you will have face-to-face and online opportunities to work with trained facilitators with content and a platform provided by the program. This program goes deeper than traditional sit-and-get professional development because it:

- is **job embedded**: activities and planning are **immediately applicable** in your school
- sets aside the **time** you need to **make a plan**
- gives you access to **data collection tools** to drive decisions
- connects** you to a diverse group of principals & districts **across the nation**
- is based on a **proven North Carolina** professional learning program

**F2F Meeting Dates**

Date	Session
August 27, 2015	Session 1
September 17, 2015	Session 2
October 15, 2015	Session 3
November 18, 2015	Session 4
January 21, 2016	Session 5

**Session 4 - Meeting Location Information**  
 November 19th from 8:30-3:  
 Cumberland High School  
 2600 Mendon Road  
 Cumberland, RI 02864

LBDL - RIASP Course Site

## IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

### **Facilitation takes time and requires careful preparation**

The RI LBDL facilitators recognized that to be successful, they wanted and needed to customize the Friday Institute content to make it “their own”, align it to the local RI context, and facilitate it with their own voices. The facilitators did this successfully, with each lead facilitator (one per session) putting in time prepping for the session they were leading, and supporting the rest of the team in prepping for the other sessions. As the program got underway, the facilitators noted the significant work and careful planning they needed to do to make each session powerful and engaging, and they had to find time to do this work, on top of the many responsibilities they each had in their jobs. It would have been even harder to accomplish and sustain these activities (preparing the LBDL-RI website, customizing the slides, gathering and preparing materials, communicating with the participants, etc.) without such a strong facilitator team and division of labor.

As the LBDL-RI team gets ready to deliver a second round of training in the upcoming school year, they will be able to build on the work they did for this initial round, which should lessen the work that needs to be done. Future rounds of LBDL facilitation training will also need to draw on this experience to prepare new groups of facilitators for the realities of the time commitment to plan the sessions and deliver the content.

### **School leader schedules may conflict with full participation**

Each of the LBDL face-to-face sessions were well-attended, and most participating school leaders completed the entire program. Still, for some participants, there were missed sessions due to scheduling conflicts and other barriers. For example, one principal noted in their end of program feedback that they “could not commit to the second part of the day on one session due to building issues that required my attention (I am an elementary principal with no assistant principal)”. Another principal shared similar feedback, noting, “I was late to a couple sessions due to professional obligations at my school site, but that is part of ensuring a successful school community.” Another principal talked about a different but related scheduling challenge, noting the “lack of PD time with the faculty to share the great things I’ve learned.”

These and other time and schedule issues have a real and uneven impact on the participating school leaders. Future iterations of both the facilitator training and the principal training will benefit from an increased focus on

preparing facilitators to handle the time challenges principals have in participating in the training and implementing the content in their schools.

### ***Participation in online components may lag behind participation in face-to-face activities***

Related to the above challenge, many principals focused on attending the face-to-face sessions and considered the online activities as optional, despite the many efforts of the facilitators to remind participants about the online components via email and other means, and the many connections facilitators made to the online components during the face-to-face sessions. When participants were asked about the most valuable components of the LBDL program, many talked about the face-to-face components as being most valuable, commenting on the “in-person collaboration” and the “face to face meetings and their set ups/activities” as most valuable.

While the face-to-face sessions were well planned and delivered, the online activities are also carefully developed as an integrated component, critical to the learning and experience. In addition, the program is designed intentionally to recognize the importance of principals being able to experience varied blended learning models first hand and reflect on how these types of models may work for professional development and/or student learning in their schools based on their first-hand experience. Future iterations of the program will need to increase emphasis on the importance of the online components and review how it is presented, as well as develop additional facilitation strategies to ensure participants engage in this important part of the program.

### ***Technology skills vary widely***

It's important for facilitators to be prepared for the wide range of technology skills among participating school leaders. The program is designed to accommodate both novices and more advanced technology users, with the focus on vision, culture, teaching and learning, professional learning and planning, and not specifically on technology. Still, the LBDL program exposes participants to new technology tools and skills, using them in the context of the training. The facilitators need to be aware of the different skill levels among their participants and hone their strategies to offer differentiated and personalized pathways with scaffolding and support so that participants with less skills are not frustrated or left behind. For example, in the first LBDL session, where participants created podcasts for their schools, some of the less proficient participants would not have been able to complete the activity without individual attention by the facilitators and some of the more tech savvy participants. Future facilitator trainings need to insure that new facilitation teams specifically prepare for supporting the range of tech skills their participants may bring to the program.



