



“We Feel Like We Hit the Lottery” – Florida Elementary School Earns Its First-Ever “B”

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*Instructional Empowerment’s team members served Kenly Elementary School under another company led by CEO and Executive Director of Research, Michael Toth, before Instructional Empowerment was founded. Michael Toth and the Instructional Empowerment team have perfected and applied their own evidence-based school improvement approach to achieve the same performance results through their new home at Instructional Empowerment. Team members who served Kenly - School Leadership Coach Tracy Bollinger and shared Faculty Coaches/Staff Developers Hasina Romney and Leslie Frick.



About The Author: **Tracy Bollinger**

Tracy Bollinger's 20 years in education as a knowledgeable instructional leader and dynamic classroom teacher led to her career as a Consultant. Ms. Bollinger has been part of school improvement planning, curriculum writing, district-wide professional development, and instructional coaching in Pennsylvania districts.

Principal and Leadership Coaching to increase student achievement and teacher growth are her passion and areas of focus. Her guidance of administrators to become instructional leaders while working with Turnaround Schools across the country has been very successful in helping teachers and leaders develop strong pedagogical practices, leading to increased student achievement.



Kenly Elementary School in Hillsborough County Public Schools achieved the highest learning gains in the entire state for their lowest 25% of students in math after implementing instructional systems for rigorous learning.

By: Tracy Bollinger

In all my years as a school leadership coach, one story that will stay with me is the phenomenal success at Kenly Elementary School in Hillsborough County Public Schools, Florida. I still remember my first day visiting the school. The leadership team, teachers, and students have come so far since then, and I am so proud of them for what they were able to accomplish.

In the 2018-19 school year, Kenly had earned a low "D" grade in Florida's accountability system and was just a few points from an "F." Kenly had never achieved higher than a "C,"

in the school's history, fluctuating between a "D" and "C" since 1999 when Florida started issuing school letter grades. See figure 1.

Kenly Elementary School – Letter Grade History, 2015-2019

Year	% of Total Possible Points	% Point Change	School Grade
2019	35%	-2%	"D"
2018	37%	-5%	"D"
2017	42%	+6%	"C"
2016	36%	-2%	"D"
2015	38%	-	"D"

Figure 1. Note that no grade was assigned in 2020 due to COVID. Florida began to use the FSA standardized test in 2015. Kenly scored four "D"s and one "C" since that time and was close to an "F" in 2019 (an "F" is 31% or less – [source](#)). All data comes from the Florida Department of Education's publicly accessible database.

Russell Wallace, an experienced turnaround principal, became Kenly's new principal in 2019. Russell and his assistant principals – Carmen Sheffield and Rich Munkwitz – were completely new to the building. When they found out Kenly had been chosen for a partnership for school improvement support, Russell said he felt like he had "hit the lottery."

I was excited to meet the leadership team and glad they were eager to get to work, but I knew we had a lot of challenges ahead. Russell said he didn't even know where to start.

Typically, on a first leadership coaching day, the consulting team works with the school leadership team to determine a plan of action.

But on our first day together, the leadership team had to run out of the room every five minutes to respond to incidents like students running off the campus or hitting their teachers. The school leadership team kept saying, "We're sorry, we're sorry, we just don't know what to do." On Russell's first day at the school, there were 27 elopements. I remember wondering how we were going to help the team find the time and attention to even start putting stronger systems into place that would prevent these types of conditions issues.

I visited classrooms on that first day, too. Instruction was very traditional – students sat compliantly while the teachers talked.

Kenly's teachers were doing all the thinking and explaining, where research supports that students learn more when they are actively engaged and explain their thinking to one another (Toth & Sousa, 2019). It was clear that Kenly was struggling schoolwide with both conditions and instruction.

Kenly has a few classrooms for students who are severely emotionally and behaviorally disturbed (EBD). Kids sometimes hit and kicked each other, and students and teachers were occasionally taken away in ambulances. Visiting those classrooms broke my heart because there were kids hiding under desks or in closets holding books and just sitting there

all day because their teachers didn't challenge these students to learn – they focused only on controlling student behaviors. I would sit with the kids and talk to them about their books, and they loved to tell me about the stories, but there was just no instruction happening and I knew that had to change.

Kenly serves a population of students who have been historically marginalized, with 98% economically disadvantaged, and 95% students of color (see figure 2). Knowing that many of Kenly's students face significant systemic barriers made our work there feel especially critical.

"We have about 25 kids who fall into the category of homeless or in foster care. That number is a little lower than actuality because not everybody is willing to share that information. It can be a very private situation that families go through. I think the biggest thing we learned during COVID is that the basic needs of our families – food, clothing, shelter – that need is larger than our stats might show.

Don't ever tell me Kenly's kids can't learn. They just need the right systems to be able to thrive."

– Russell Wallace, Principal (2019-2021), Kenly Elementary School

Kenly Elementary School – Student Demographics	
55% Black	98% Economically Disadvantaged
25% Hispanic	5% Homeless or in Foster Care
15% Multi-racial	
5% White	

Figure 2. Kenly Elementary School's student demographics, as reported by principal Russell Wallace. Russell noted that the number of students who are homeless or in foster care may be higher because that information is not always shared with the school.

6 Key Shifts That Helped Kenly Succeed – With Examples

As the school leadership team started using an instructional systems approach, we focused on shifting a few key areas. We put systems into place that an Applied Research Center identified as the best practices in the areas of greatest leverage. Here are 6 shifts that helped Kenly succeed, including specific examples:

1. Improving Conditions

Working on the conditions of a school is an important place to start. When student behavior is out of control, it creates an environment where it is impossible for effective instruction to take place and for students to engage in their learning. Challenging conditions can also lead to teacher burnout, so it's important to find ways to keep your staff's morale up.

- **Example – Behavior specialist:** Walkthrough metrics identified conditions as an issue, and I discussed our specific findings with the area supervisor. She agreed to increase Kenly's support by bringing another behavior specialist on board.
- **Example – Refreshing the teacher's lounge:** The school leadership team – Russell, Carmen, and Rich – spent an entire weekend repainting the faculty lounge. They bought new furniture and made the room look beautiful so their teachers would have a nice place to go. The teachers were so appreciative, and I think it really made a big difference as far as improving staff morale.

2. Action Board Process

One of the first steps in the school leadership coaching process is getting the school's team up and running with an action board. An action board is a visible tool that allows a team to take their goals and break them down into actions, monitor the progress of those actions, and make adjustments. The school leadership team engages in a daily stand-up meeting where they review the action board together and plan their daily actions. The action board system gives teams a clear focus on where they should spend their time and efforts.



- **Example – The action board layout:** The photo above is an example of Kenly's leadership team using their action board during a daily stand-up. Notice there are sticky notes in three columns labeled: "to do," "doing," and "done."

- **Example – Embracing productive struggle with action boards:** The instructional systems approach is about long-term sustainability instead of quick fixes. The action board system is not something you can put into place overnight. Russell, Carmen, and Rich still remember the hours of productive struggle we went through in setting up their board. The process helped the leadership team take ownership of their goals, and they saw value in the work as we started to see gains in their student data – successes that directly resulted from the actions on the team's board.

3. Data Wall

Another important coaching tool in the instructional systems approach is the data wall, which makes the team's results visible. Data walls create transparency, accountability, and a way to measure progress on a daily basis rather than waiting for longer-term metrics like diagnostic tests. The data wall drives teacher planning, and in turn, when teachers plan with data, it fosters student ownership of their own data. Kenly has come a long way from when they started – they now have all their students tracking their own data and doing reflection logs.





4. PLCs, Lesson Planning, and Coaching

Teacher professional development was a major part of Kenly's turnaround. We implemented protocols for Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Teachers began to come prepared knowing the standards that would be addressed that day and ideas for learning targets and success criteria. The PLCs shifted the focus of Kenly's classroom lessons to solid standard-based instruction with aligned tasks.

- **Example – What does a data wall look like?** The photo above and on the previous page are examples of Kenly's data wall. One photo shows the school team reviewing 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade data. The second photo shows a fifth-grade student who exceeded her monthly math goal by almost 30 points. Kenly students are included in data discussions, setting goals, and tracking their own performance. (Photo credits: [Kenly Elementary School's twitter](#).)
- **Example – How do you make a data wall actionable?** *"I think the biggest factor that helped us achieve 94% of our students in the bottom quartile making learning gains in math was progress monitoring student data on a consistent basis [using our data wall]. It's also about how the coaches use the data to inform their interactions with teachers, and how teachers take that and use it with their students. But it all has to start with using data to understand individual student goals and where students are."*

– **Russell Wallace, Principal (2019-2021), Kenly Elementary School**

- **Example – What does gradual release of PLC ownership look like?:** As part of our sustainable coaching, the consulting team helps put the PLC structure into place and coaches the school coaches to gradually release ownership to teacher teams. Leaders continually monitor classroom implementation to ensure the PLC system is getting results for all students. See below for a graphical representation of the consulting team's gradual release to school leaders and teacher teams.
- **Example – Why should you include all classroom teachers in lesson planning?:** Kenly's teachers of EBD classrooms (emotionally and behaviorally disturbed) received planning time in PLCs along with other classroom teachers. Side-by-side instructional coaching also helped EBD classrooms become more focused on academics so all students could succeed.



"Every time the consulting team came to Kenly, everyone on this campus looked forward to our time together. There are not many times you can get folks excited about staying until 4:00 or 4:30pm for after-school PD, but our teachers were excited. And our leadership team was always grateful for our time together with the consulting team. It really set the foundation for our work."

– Russell Wallace, Principal (2019-2021), Kenly Elementary School



"One of the systems that really helped Kenly was developing student ownership in learning. I remember teachers talking about their worries that students can't work together collaboratively because student behavior might be impacted. The reality was that student behavior WAS impacted because students behaved a whole lot BETTER when we gave them a chance to talk and use academic teaming tools! Thinking maps and agree/disagree cards and other academic teaming protocols helped our students engage in deeper-level conversations and made learning visible. Those tools and systems are still in place today."

– Russell Wallace, Principal (2019-2021), Kenly Elementary School

5. Student-Led Rigorous Learning

Introducing a student-led approach to classroom instruction made a big difference in engagement and deeper learning at Kenly. Students engaged in a research-based instructional process, using specific structures and tools to collaborate on rigorous academic tasks. Students experienced academic rigor and productive struggle. Teachers were able to hear more student voices and had a better understanding of how students were learning and if they had any gaps that needed to be addressed.

- **Example – Student tools like summarizing mats make learning visible:** Students at Kenly used summarizing mats and other academic teaming tools to collaborate with their peers and engage in their learning. In the following photo, students are individually writing their thoughts before they discuss and debate as a team and write a summary in the middle of the mat.

6. Ownership and Sustainability

The consulting team's approach to school improvement is unique because we focus on putting systems into place that are sustainable and will remain in place even if the coach and team members leave the school. Kenly has taken complete ownership of the work and is still using a systems approach even after we parted ways. Kenly's assistant principals, Carmen and Rich, moved to different schools in the district – but now they have the confidence and knowledge to build systems and move student data in their new schools by using what they learned from the consulting team.

- **Example: Targeted support and coaching–** Specific systems help to create long-term support structures in schools. These systems include live coaching, professional development, and classroom walkthroughs. We helped to foster ownership through a combination of productive struggle and empowering the leadership team to make decisions rather than telling them what to do.

The consistency in having the consulting team here every week – and being able to do in-depth professional development in the afternoons – the targeted PD that they provided is not always available at every school. The pieces provided are a total package. Sometimes I hear from my principal friends at turnaround schools where they have an external operator, and they don't see their external operator as consistently. At times, they're not even on site. There's a lot of virtual pieces, but not everything lends itself to virtual. I just feel like if there is ever going to be an external operator that works with schools, the consulting team should have that role.

– Russell Wallace, principal at Kenly Elementary School

Conclusion: Kenly's "B" and Record-Breaking Learning Gains

The consulting team was so excited when Russell sent me a text message saying that Kenly had achieved their first ever "B" in school history (see figure 3). We were so proud of them and all the work they did using the systems approach.

Kenly also achieved the highest math learning gains for their lowest quartile **in the entire state of Florida** for 2021 (see figure 4).

"If you draw a five-mile circle around Kenly, you won't find another 'A' or 'B' rated elementary school in that circle. We're excited for the work that we did, and the work that we're still planning to do. Our goal is not to stay a 'B' school but to have next year become Kenly's first 'A.'"

– Russell Wallace, Principal (2019-2021), Kenly Elementary School

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2017	42%	+6%	"C"
2016	36%	-2%	"D"
2015	38%	-	"D"

Figure 3. Note that no grade was assigned in 2020 due to COVID. Florida began to use the FSA standardized test in 2015. Kenly scored mostly "D"s since that time and was close to an "F" in 2019 (an "F" is 31% or less – source). All data comes from the Florida Department of Education's publicly accessible database.

"Our motto last year was 'I'm not here to be average. I'm here to be awesome.' The kids and staff all had t-shirts with the motto, and our signature lines had it too. It really was the belief that our kids here in East Tampa who come to our school and live in this community deserve to have somebody believe that they can be more than average. We have to be the people to do that first."

– Russell Wallace, Principal (2019-2021), Kenly Elementary School

Kenly Elementary School: Achievement and Learning Gains

Math Gains More Than Doubled

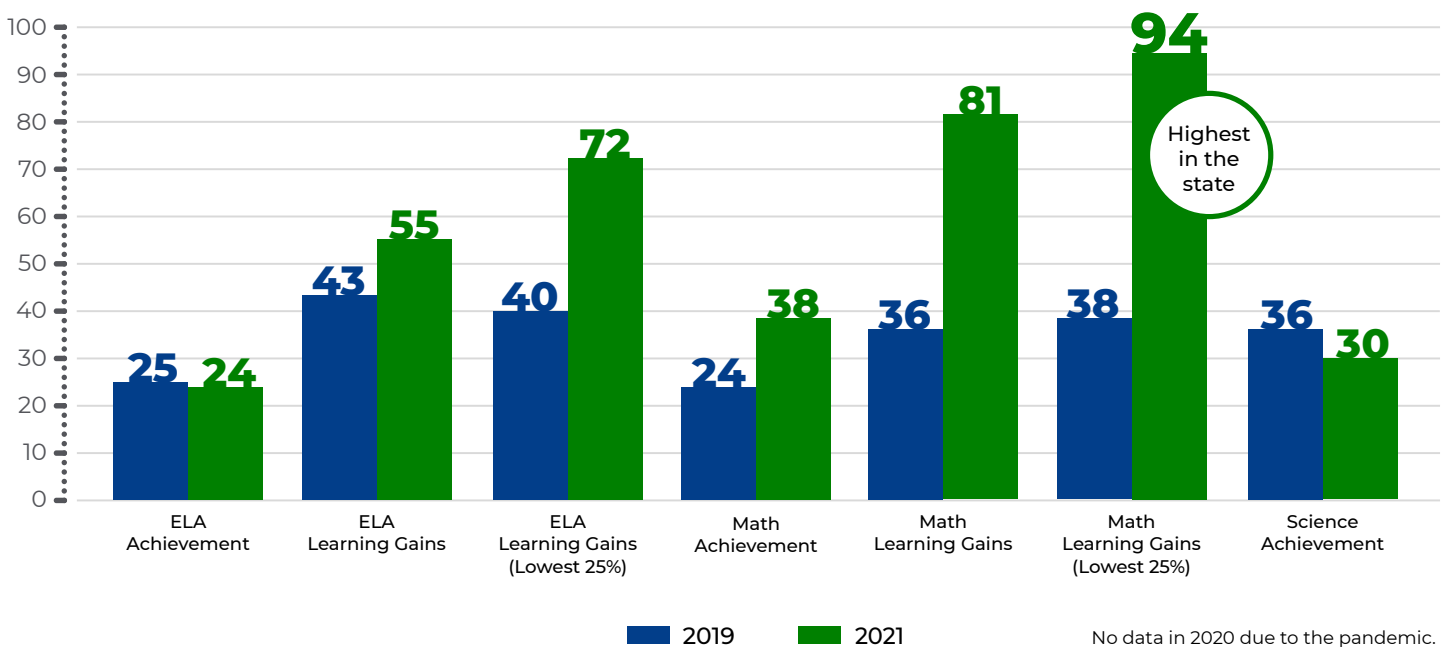


Figure 4. Kenly achieved high learning gains across the board, including the highest math learning gains of the lowest 25% in the entire state of Florida. All data comes from the Florida Department of Education's publicly accessible database.

Kenly's journey was truly incredible and I'm grateful to have been a part of that. By the end of the school year, when I visited classrooms, I could see the difference myself. Kids who may have been at a disadvantage because of their life circumstances are now getting an excellent education in a supportive environment, and they are thriving. A school leadership team who felt overwhelmed now feels confident and is continuing to make a positive impact on children every day. This is why we do the work that we do.

References

Toth, M. D. & Sousa, D. A. (2019). *The power of student teams: Achieving social, emotional, and cognitive learning in every classroom through academic teaming*. Learning Sciences International.

"When I reflect back on where we started, and trying to put new systems into place, I just know that we were always together with the consulting team in that process. Sometimes when you work with other groups of people for a common cause, it's not always as seamless as the work with the consulting team was. Our coach, Tracy, knew when to push, and she knew when to hug us when we were about to crash. Every time the consulting team was on campus, even if the work was tough, it always felt like it was done in a supportive way. Sometimes folks come on your campus and tell you what to do and then leave and you don't see them again for a month and they come back and tell you all the stuff you did wrong. That's not the way of work with the consulting team. The sustainability of the effort is what I love the most. We weren't able to have the consulting team back for a second year, but the systems stayed in place."

– Russell Wallace, Principal (2019-2021), Kenly Elementary School

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