# Friday Institute Education Brief

## Nine Key Lessons from the Centennial Campus Magnet Middle School Learning Differences Program

This brief highlights nine key lessons from the case study "Becoming Embedded In What We Do" The Implementation and Impact of the Learning Differences Program at Centennial Campus Magnet Middle School in Raleigh, North Carolina. In analyzing the data, the Friday Institute found nine key lessons from CCMMS Learning Differences program implementation that may help future schools and districts as they design their implementation strategies, namely:

### Lesson 1: Establish School Leader Commitment Early

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Much of the success of the Learning Differences program implementation at CCMMS can be attributed to the early commitment of Principal Hutchinson. As mentioned previously, this partnership was built to mutually benefit CCMMS and the Friday Institute (FI). Principal Hutchinson was a key stakeholder in developing the partnership because she envisioned how this program could benefit her staff and students. In no uncertain terms, Principal Hutchinson supported the implementation, which sent a clear message to her staff that it was a priority for her. Others seeking to implement this program in a school community should consider how to first engage with the school leaders and develop a meaningful partnership with them.

### Lesson 2: Align the Program with the School's Priorities

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Another key success factor in the program implementation was aligning the program with the school's priorities. CCMMS is a leadership magnet school that specializes in The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens. The magnet coordinator took the initiative of aligning the learning differences concepts with Sean Covey's 7 Habits and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education to more fully integrate learning differences into the school's existing work. Teachers did not feel as though learning differences was "additional work" but rather it was a part of their daily work. As the magnet coordinator exclaimed in a meeting, learning differences became embedded in what they did.

### Lesson 3: Identify an On-the-Ground Champion and Teacher Leaders

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While the principal is the instructional leader of the school, they often do not have the time to delve into the intricacies of program implementation. Instead, mid-level school administrators may be well suited for this role. In addition to identifying an on-the-ground teacher leaders who will rally around the project and will support the work. The program developers believe fostering these additional program ambassadors help diffuse the innovation more broadly within a school community. Future sites may be more intentional about formalizing such roles that can lead to incentivizing and celebrating participation.

## Lesson 4: Dedicate Time to Fully Orient and Train Staff

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In CCMMS implementation, building teacher knowledge and excitement about the program was difficult due to limited time and competing priorities. CCMMS administrators would have preferred "more intentional time together before [they] rolled out the program." In retrospect, the program developers recommend taking at least one hour to properly launch the program. In an ideal environment, the program developers also suggest providing follow-up professional development opportunities to the staff while implementing the program. These opportunities can increase staff self-efficacy. Teachers themselves must have a clear understanding of the program and believe in it to communicate its importance to students. Others seeking to implement this program in a school community should work with school leaders to budget adequate time for engaging with teachers prior to and during implementation.

## Lesson 5: Align the Program with the School's Priorities

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Building on the need for solid teacher orientation and training, sites may consider a phased implementation. For example, in the initial weeks of CCMMS implementation, teachers and students were learning how to access the online courses simultaneously, and the learning curve prompted frustration. The magnet school coordinator encouraged teachers to come to them with questions and issues, acknowledging that their school was the "guinea pig." However, the champion feared the program may lose momentum if teachers did not have dedicated time to collectively reflect, vent and problem solve implementation challenges. While some of the challenges were out of the teachers' locus of control, such as lack of technology, these challenges were exacerbated by the fact that some teachers were not reviewing the lessons before presenting them to students.

## Lesson 6: Develop a Communication Process

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Consistent communication amongst the implementation team through weekly meetings and memos proved effective to identify and respond to implementation challenges in a timely manner. Although all schools and districts do not have the luxury to have an evaluator and liaison correspond each week, they can develop a flow chart process for how they plan to communicate throughout the implementation.

## Lesson 7: Adapt the Program to Match Your Technology and Teacher Preferences

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At the beginning of the partnership, CCMMS teachers and administrators described how lack of technology was a significant barrier to program implementation. The program developers, magnet coordinator and teachers worked collaboratively to respond to this challenge by developing a series of low and no technology lesson options in which the teacher could facilitate learning differences dialogues and activities. Thus, it is advisable that future sites consider adapting program activities to match the quality and quantity of technology available to them. CCMMS administrators also underscored the importance of teacher preferences. Even though other sites may have access to technology, their teachers may prefer low or no technology options. Including teachers as an active thought partner can help sites make more informed decisions about how to adapt the program to fit their context.

## Lesson 8: Incentivize and Celebrate Participation

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While obtaining some teacher buy-in was challenging at the beginning of the partnership, a significant turning point occurred when the implementation team began to incentivize and celebrate teacher participation. For instance, after observing advisory classrooms, the FI liaison would share exemplar best practices with the magnet coordinator, who would then spotlight teachers in their staff newsletter. Additionally, the implementation team created and hand delivered thank you holiday goodie bags to teachers before winter break. These examples demonstrate how the team was intentional about expressing their appreciation to teachers. CCMMS administrators described how these efforts were well received by the teachers and led to garnering more teacher buy-in. It is recommended that future sites develop strategies for incentivizing and celebrating participation early and often.

## Lesson 9: Adopt a Collective Growth Mindset

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The Learning Differences program developers and the CCMMS administrators adopted a growth mindset towards implementation. Both parties understood that embarking on this journey of formative evaluation was novel and uncharted territory. However, both parties embraced the challenge and were agile to iterative refinement. In particular, the program developers welcomed constructive feedback from teachers about usability and then made changes based on teacher input. CCMMS administrators expressed that a transformative moment in the case study occurred when teachers realized that program developers were responding to their feedback. At that moment, teachers truly felt that they were an integral part of the partnership. Additionally, instead of being discouraged by setbacks, team members remained optimistic as they proactively brainstormed timely solutions. Their ability to pivot to meet the needs of their evolving context was key to preserving through the implementation hiccups. Other sites would benefit from developing similar perspectives.

## About the Friday Institute

The Friday Institute for Educational Innovation brings together researchers, practitioners and policymakers to lead the transition to next-generation education systems that will prepare students for success in the digital-age world. It conducts research, develops educational resources, provides professional development programs for educators, advocates to improve teaching and learning, and helps inform policymaking. The Friday Institute is a part of the NC State College of Education. Visit fi.ncsu.edu to learn more.

## About the Authors
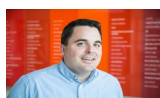
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