

# Searching for the root cause

## An interview with Bridget Goree, NSI coordinator for North Dallas high school



**Rosita E. Apodaca**  
IFL executive director

Campus Network for School Improvement (NSI) coordinators learn to discover and understand the root causes of a problem of practice and find that understanding the problem takes time and requires a cultural shift. In this interview, Bridget Goree, an instructional coach at North Dallas High School, shares her own experience learning to approach this work. She discusses three considerations—what to stop doing, what is important to do, and what they are learning to build.

### Focus of the Network

The Institute for Learning partnered with the Dallas Independent School District, the University of Pittsburgh's Center for Urban Education, and the Learning Research and Development Center to support teams from 14 middle and high schools in Dallas. The teams are using improvement science to try to increase the number of Black, Latino, English learners,



*Bridget Goree is the Campus Improvement Network Coordinator at North Dallas High School, where she serves as the English Language Arts and Reading Department Lead/Campus Instructional Coach, AP Language & Composition/AP Literature & Composition/Debate Teacher and Debate Coach.*

and low-income students who are proficient in English language arts and on track at the end of 9th grade for high school graduation. This work is supported through a grant from The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Writing is a particular challenge in the proposed schools as evidenced by students' scores on the middle school state writing assessment.

An average of only 21% of students passed the writing exam in the seven middle schools in our network in 2018.

Campus NSI coordinators attend monthly network meetings. These meetings began in November 2018 and are meant to build coordinators' knowledge around improvement science and high-quality instruction and learning. Coordinators take the work they do at their monthly meetings back to their school-based improvement teams and work as a community to learn from teaching and learning artifacts. They will soon begin implementing some small tests of change based upon what they have learned from their school-based artifacts.



REA: Bridget, what have you been learning through this improvement science process?

BG: We know what the problem is

and that there are gaps in achievement for some of our at-risk and minority students. Right now we are trying to hone in on what we can do as teachers, as a school, as administrators, and as a district to figure out what the root cause of the problem may be. That was the key "aha" moment for me—to find out what the root cause is on our particular campus that is contributing to that problem. This [the root cause] is the action item that we can actually take control of and plan and structure responses and then tackle the problem with solutions that are viable, doable, and workable.

*"To figure out what the root cause that is contributing to the problem was an 'aha' moment for me."*

REA: You have been studying student achievement, demographics, and other [quantitative] data, and now you're looking at qualitative data, such as the empathy interviews. How was that process?

BG: Looking at how tasks were created came before we conducted empathy interviews. We know the skills and strategies we want to develop, but studying tasks to see if the task is pushing students far enough—meeting them where they are but still pushing them and challenging them enough and not just meeting them where they are—is very important work. We have to expect more and demand more if we want more. That process starts with how we design tasks and what we ask students to do and then with that comes how we scaffold and support their success.

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## Partner Spotlight

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challenge for me was sticking with the tasks when the students struggled. The first couple times I felt like a failure because the students just couldn't get through the problem. They didn't want to try to work through it because they didn't know it, and I couldn't help every single student out. I wanted to give up on the tasks and chalk it up to my kids weren't ready for them and it was too difficult for them. I hated seeing that struggle and I hated seeing that disappointment in their faces when they couldn't do it. However, after going over those first couple tasks with the classes afterwards and showing them what I was looking for, you could almost see the light bulb going off for more and more of them... I decided to keep exposing my kids to the tasks, and

I believe they are getting more and more comfortable with the idea of a high-level task, and I believe that the majority of the students are starting to believe in themselves in that they are capable of getting through a task."

Implementation is difficult on several fronts and takes time to develop. Early on in the process and when instructional focus slips, there is a chance that a high-level task is not implemented in a way that maintains its demand. Sometimes teachers inadvertently diminish the cognitive demand of a high-level task by shifting the focus of the work to "getting the answer" as opposed to pressing for meaning, concepts, or understanding of the mathematics. Sometimes teachers rush through the task, rather than providing adequate time for

students to explore, grapple, and make sense of the mathematics, which also results in lowering the cognitive demand. The instructional choices that teachers make when implementing a high-level task can result in either maintaining the demand of the task or lowering the demand. See a [full list of the factors](#) that result in the maintenance or decline of the task's cognitive demand.

Haist, who has been using high-level tasks for a few years and continues to work on how to ensure rigor in her classroom, says: "One of my biggest challenges is to stay focused on my desired lesson outcomes. This year I've been really focused in all my lessons to assess daily student learning... By reflecting on the essential components of a task (and every lesson, for that

matter), I am better able to use the tasks to advance all student learning."

In the end, yes, using high-level tasks in math classrooms is worth the effort and energy. Not only do high-level task offer students opportunities to think and reason about mathematics, but engaging in such tasks regularly also changes how students see themselves. As Schroth concludes, "What I have found when using high-level tasks is that my students are starting to believe in themselves with regards to figuring out problems." ■

Special thanks to the contributing teachers in our partner districts:

- Cat Haist, eighth grade math teacher in East Haddam, CT
- Chris Schroth, sixth grade math teacher in Syracuse, NY
- Aaron Fitzpatrick, second grade math teacher in Pittsburgh, PA

## Interview

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REA: You're telling me that looking at the writing tasks students complete and studying high-quality tasks have been very beneficial in this work. Why do you think that having high-quality tasks that push students to engage in productive struggle is important?

we're kind of cheating them at the end of the day if we only expect the minimum. They won't engage enough and the minimum is what you're going to get.

REA: And when you asked teachers and students about this issue in your empathy interviews, what did you learn?

BG: I learned that both teachers and students think there needs to be more challenge, and they both need to be pushed to tackling their job differently. We have a focus on meeting standards and numbers on tests, but we're working hard and still falling short. We need to find a different way. We need to reflect and think that when we want students to get better at their work, so do we. I have to ask myself, "Am I getting better?" Often we get comfortable thinking that what we do is enough and that the students think it is enough, but that just is not the case. We need to think differently about how to get better.

REA: How is your team responding to the work?

BG: I'm working with teachers who are responding quite well to the work. We have talked and teachers are saying, next semester or now,

we have to work in a different way. We need to reset. We are looking closely at which kids are growing and which kids are not. We need to make sure that all kids are growing, including those in advanced placement classes. If what we want is growth and depth, then we need to push ourselves and our students. We have begun to use the task analysis tools to study our work and to think about how this work can be more demanding. We already have ideas.

REA: What are you finding challenging in this process? What supports do you need at this point in the process?

BG: Time is the most challenging issue. Working to meet the turnaround deadlines for the campus team to do the work is difficult. What we have decided to do to address this challenge is to plan the work to be done organically with other work we have. We have a calendar, and this work is being done weekly alongside our other work. My principal and I have scheduled a standing meeting on Mondays to talk about our work, and this work will be part of our standing discussion so people do not see it as separate work. We want it to

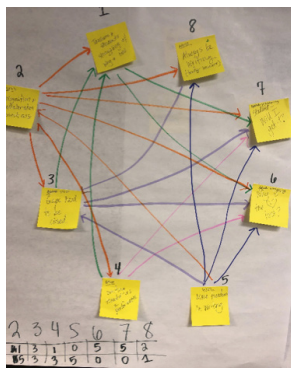
be organic. I told my principal that our coordinators' meeting had been great in terms of our learning, and she said she was looking forward to hearing about it. This way it is not separate work but work that is used to meet our goals.

REA: So you have talked about this work and how it has made you see that there are cultural changes that may have to be made. Have you thought about what that might look like for your department?

BG: I have to say that we are fortunate in our department that we have a PLC set up to tackle aspects that need change. We have spent time learning new ways, best practices, and seeing how we can better respond to student needs. So far I have not had a lot of pushback from our group because we have a strong community and a history of finding ways to work on change. This strong but positive culture has paved the way for the NSI to function in a healthy way.

REA: Thank you so much for giving me time during your day off. I know our readers will learn from your experience. I look forward to seeing you in your school soon.

BG: It was a pleasure. Thank you. ■



BG: Because I think that in studying our root cause analysis, we looked at teacher and student mindsets and student apathy, and we often hear, "My students can't do this or my students can't do that," but I think that's not the case. If we don't challenge them and push them because there is learning even in the struggle, then we won't get the gains that we want to see if we don't challenge them. I think