

IT'S ABOUT TIME

By Holly Holland



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In 2013, when Carol K. Brown became principal at MOSI Partnership School in Tampa, she told the faculty that she planned to visit their classrooms every day. Rather than



Photo: Carol K. Brown, Principal at MOSI Partnership School in Tampa

showing up just a few times a year for formal evaluations—a typical pattern for principals—Brown said she would observe frequently to see how teachers were pacing instruction, guiding practice, and interacting with students. She also would co-teach some lessons to model and collaborate; share feedback and data; and ask teachers how she could help them grow professionally. In other words, she intended to be a partner in teaching and learning.

Brown announced that she would be observed throughout the year too, working with her own set of coaches who would ensure that she was attending to the most important part of her job as principal—improving and supporting teaching and learning. Through the Tampa school district's partnership with the National SAM® Innovation Project (NSIP), Brown explained that she would have access to a software tool called TimeTrack® to help her meet her goal of spending at least 70 percent of the school day on instructional support. The system lets her set and analyze her goals and time commitments, and selected staff members can use the schedule to add or omit meetings to maintain her flow.

Teachers not only accepted Brown's visits, but they also began consulting her after class and inviting her to come back for follow-up lessons and team and department meetings. Achievement at the high-poverty elementary

school soared by the end of Brown's first year, and "staff morale is so much higher" because of the principal's involvement, says Christine Belvedere, a third grade teacher. "I feel like she encourages us to be instructional leaders."

Another third grade teacher, Stephanie Brever, says Brown has made everyone in the school accountable for learning.

When students were goofing off after Florida's spring testing period, for example, Brever sent Brown an email asking for help to refocus them during the last month of school. "Within 10 minutes, she came to my classroom, breathless, saying, 'Sorry I couldn't get here any sooner,'" Brever said. "Never in my 16 years have I had a principal who responded like that. She had one of those fierce conversations with the kids and told them that they had an important job to do to continue learning."

Brown credits NSIP for helping her to develop "a laser-like focus on instruction." Through the organization's training and coaching, Brown said, she has learned how to use data to drive instructional improvements, choose effective professional development, and raise expectations for the school.

"When you are a principal, so much of your life is all about management, and so many things can interrupt your day," Brown said. "I have ownership of my day now."

REMOVING THE DISTRACTIONS:

How principal learning improves teacher practice

In 2003, Mark Shellinger was searching for a way to help principals reapportion the scarcest component of their jobs—time. With demands that can be as unpredictable as a busted boiler and as incessant as state and federal policy mandates, a principal's day is full of distractions that often take him or her away from the most important responsibility of all—improving teaching and learning. To Shellinger, that seemed like an ineffective use of the school leader's time, considering that research shows principals are second only to teachers in having the most influence on student learning.



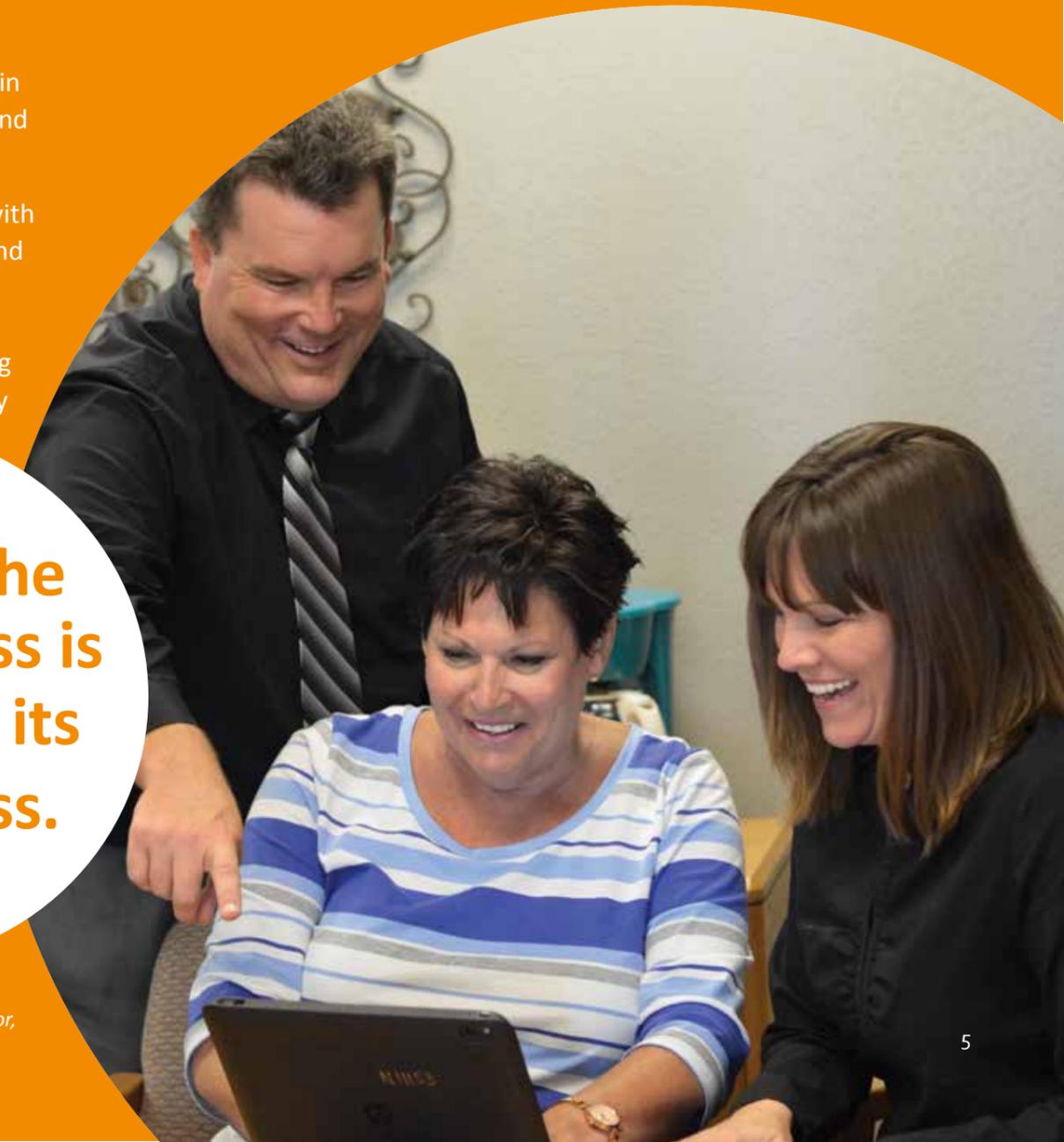
4 Photo: Mark Shellinger, Director National SAM Innovation Project

"I wanted to look at time and see whether we could use tools to help principals analyze whether they are successful with teacher practice and relationships within a school," said Shellinger, a former teacher, principal, and superintendent.

SAM is a person or team of staff members who meet with the principal each day to schedule instructional time and reflect on the results. The SAM team develops a First Responder™ system, identifying people who can deal with management issues instead of immediately pulling the principal away from teaching and learning. "Usually

Fidelity to the **SAM** process is essential to its effectiveness.

Photo: SAM team, Anthony Jones, Principal, SAMs Nancy Keane, secretary and Cassie Schroeder, International Baccalaureate Coordinator, Walker Middle School, Florida



it's a team that pushes the principal's thinking," Shellinger said. "The SAM is trained to ask a series of questions, such as, 'What did you see today during your classroom walk-throughs that you were most impressed with?' These conversations become rich interactions and a great training ground for principals. It changes the relationships in schools."

As part of the partnership with NSIP, principals meet monthly with a SAM Time Change Coach and the SAM Implementation Specialist, who explain technical features of TimeTrack. They also have daily conferences with the school's SAM team, which provides constructive feedback about how well they are guiding school improvement efforts.

At MOSI Partnership School, which shares a campus with Tampa's Museum of Science and Industry, Assistant Principal Renel Mathurin serves as Brown's SAM. Mathurin said the two "have conversations all day long, passing in the hallway, during morning patrol duty, and during our daily conferences. In our meetings, I might say, 'Talk to me about how it went when you team-taught today with Mrs. So and So. What happened?' Or, if she missed that appointment,



**Let's look at TimeTrack.
Are you getting the results
you want?**

Photo: SAM Renel Mathurin, Assistant Principal MOSI Partnership School, Florida

'Why was that missed? Let's look at the calendar. Do we have another time you can go back and schedule that in?'"

Mathurin said the intimate access to the principal's job and the respect he gets from Brown help to prepare him for an eventual promotion.

MORE TIME FOR LEARNING

Independent research from Policy Study Associates, Washington D.C., shows that participating principals gain the equivalent of 27 extra days of instructional leadership time in their first year of working with NSIP and more than 55 days by the third year. Researchers can precisely pinpoint that outcome because NSIP establishes a baseline of time allocation by shadowing principals for a full week each year. Using the TimeTask Analysis™ Data Collector, observers code how principals spend their day in five-minute increments. The same instrument is then used throughout the school year to track the principal's routine practices and measure changes in areas such as using data, leading instructionally focused conversations, connecting with families, and building a culture of learning.

For example, TimeTrack can show a principal how much time he has spent with each teacher, disaggregated by different kinds of observations, instructional support, and

feedback. SAM teams can use the data to help the principal reflect and refine his approach, asking questions such as:

- Is your interaction with the teacher frequent enough to support the changes you are seeking?
- Would the teacher benefit from watching you model/teach?
- You've invested the most time with this teacher in Decision Making Meetings, like a Personal Learning Community or department/grade level meeting. Why? How has this time helped her improve her practice?
- Did the nine hours of professional development time you spent with this teacher help? Can you see a change in practice tied to this time spent?

"The beauty of SAM is that you get to drill down into the data to find out if what you're doing is working," said Anthony Jones, principal of Walker Middle Magnet School in Odessa, Florida. "I'm grateful for a school district that would invest in this work that is so differentiated for my needs. The purpose of school reform is to make sure principals are good instructional leaders. You hear it over and over again. This is the tool that makes that happen efficiently and effectively."

OWNING ONE'S TIME, RATHER THAN BEING DOMINATED BY IT

Research reveals that most principals initially spend about 30 percent of their time on activities that are directly related to learning, such as observing and modeling instruction, providing feedback to teachers, and shaping curriculum and assessment.

NSIP encourages principals to raise the ratio to at least 50 percent, but many SAM participants routinely hit targets of 70 percent and beyond.

The tracking process is not meant to be a “gotcha device” for either principals or teachers, but rather a tool to help principals provide clear guidance and support. When principals rarely visit classrooms, such as only during formal evaluation periods, teachers feel defensive that the snapshots of instruction misrepresent the fuller context of their work. Likewise, principals feel frustrated that they can’t do enough to help the school reach its accountability targets.

In contrast, principals participating in the SAM process say they gain clarity about what is happening throughout their schools and specific advice about how to make necessary changes. On a national level, states are adopting much

more complex and specific tools and practices for teacher evaluation. SAMs can help a principal use those with fidelity.

Roberta “Bert” Hendee, who coordinates NSIP’s work in Illinois and is president of the NSIP Board, recalled how an experienced elementary school principal shared that after working with NSIP, she finally “felt confident going into classrooms, knowing why she was going there and what to do with the observations. Her greatest success was two teachers who liked to close their classroom doors and resisted observations, but by the end of the second year as a SAM school both were coming to her saying, ‘please come in and observe me and provide feedback.’ They made phenomenal changes.”

The Hillsborough County Public Schools in Florida have had so much success with the SAM process—100 principals and all principal supervisors in the Tampa-area district are currently involved—that officials plan to make it part of the induction process for all new principals starting in 2015. In addition, the district has opened the NSIP training and TimeTrack support to all principal supervisors to help them coach school administrators in the same way that principals are guiding teachers.



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Carol Brown was trained with the first cohort of Tampa principals in summer/fall 2012, and Anthony Jones with the third group in winter 2012/spring 2013. Jones, now in his fourth year as a principal, said the major benefit of the SAM process is that “it has quantified in real time how I spend my time. You think you know what goes on in a day, but until someone follows you and charts you, you really don’t. When you look at the (TimeTrack) report, you always think you’re out there in the school more than you are, but then you realize how an email or a phone call will draw you back into the office.

“My overall goal to be an instructional leader has always been the same. But instead of thinking, hoping, guessing—I know now what I’m doing.”

With prodding from Nancy Keane, the school secretary who leads Jones’s SAM team, and guidance from his Time Change Coach, Jones has become more visible in classrooms, spreading the strategies of talented teachers instead of only supporting struggling ones, and following his observations with feedback designed to bring more consistency to instruction.

OPENING UP PRACTICE

"I think the faculty has definitely noticed the difference," said Cassie Schroeder, the school's International Baccalaureate coordinator who also serves on the SAM team. "Another huge shift he wants for next year is to change the mentality of keeping our doors closed to, 'let's all be in each other's classrooms. Let's grab two teachers during our planning period and go in to watch someone and see what we can learn.'"

Jones believes he has a duty to help teachers mentor their colleagues. He said he'd love to extend the SAM training to his entire faculty to spread its culture of reflection, feedback, and professional development, which research shows to be an essential part of school improvement. In time, he hopes to alter the faculty's traditional view of a principal as a classroom bystander.

"For many years, teachers would say, 'he was a good principal; he left us alone, he let us do our job,'" Jones said. "I think we need to shift to, 'he's a good principal because he helped me do my job better.'"



Photo, above: SAM team, Carol Brown, Principal, Stephanie Brever, SAM/teacher, Christine Belvedere, teacher, Mosi Partnership School, Florida

Photo, left: SAM team, Asia Gurney, Principal, Nicole Murphy, SAM/teacher with Bert Hendee, Time Change Coach, Lakewood School, Illinois

100 schools and all principal supervisors in Tampa, Florida use the SAM process.

REFLECTING ON PRACTICE

Although TimeTrack data enables principals to get a better grip on the school day, reflective coaching ensures that they use the information to become better leaders. Whether the Time Change Coach is assisting the principal or the principal is working with teachers, the goal of all guidance is personal and professional growth.

"That's what I love about my (Time Change) coach," Jones said. "She doesn't come in with a checklist and say, 'here's what you're doing wrong.' She isn't a spy. Based on my practice, she asks me to arrive at the answers."

The willingness to go back to the drawing board, to humbly accept feedback and assistance, and to be the first learner in the school is a distinguishing quality of many SAM principals. Data drives their decisions, and a computerized calendar categorizes their choices, but it is their relentless passion for knowledge that defines their work. Through reflective analysis of their job performance, they keep asking: How did it impact the kids? And what do I do next?

A recent exchange at MOSI Partnership School shows how that process plays out. Brown and Mathurin meet monthly with Time Change Coach Shaylia McRae. McRae, who guides



Photo: Shaylia McRae, SAM Time Change Coach, Tampa, Florida

eight SAM principals in the Hillsborough County district, said she asks administrators to continually return to two key questions: “Is how I’m spending my time making a difference? And if not, what can I do to change?”

During 30- to 60-minute conversations, she helps principals and SAMs identify the school’s needs, using “Facilitative Coaching” strategies. The non-judgmental practices include paraphrasing, clarifying, gathering and interpreting data, using hypothetical questions, offering feedback, and helping principals synthesize new learning and communicate actionable steps.

In early June, for example, during the last scheduled meeting of the school year at MOSI, McRae used a working lunch with Brown and Mathurin to analyze an annual district review of the school’s learning culture. The anonymous survey of teachers uses about 75 key indicators of student conduct, school leadership, parent involvement, and professional development to see how faculties perceive their work environment and how the results compare to other schools within the district.

“Overall, the survey is remarkable” for MOSI, McRae told Brown and Mathurin. “These are such high marks, it will be hard to improve next year.”

Brown said she had shared the results with the teachers earlier in the week so they would have time to review the information before a staff meeting later that day.

FOCUSING ON RESULTS

“What is your expected outcome?” McRae asked her.

“I want them to identify three areas of strengths and three areas to work on, and I don’t want to be the one to tell them,” Brown said.

“If you had to guess, what do you think they will talk about?” McRae asked.

Mathurin answered: “They’re always concerned about parent support. My question is always, ‘What are parents not doing? Are they not signing homework or agenda planners? Are they not returning a phone call? And what difference does that make? Is it just two parents in the class? Is that really a big issue?’”

PRODDING PRINCIPALS TO THINK STRATEGICALLY

McRae nodded then prodded, “What is a quick activity you could do to help teachers visualize that lack of parental support is a smaller problem than they think?”

They suggested asking teachers to quantify consistent incidents of non-responsiveness from parents and then share and compare results with the full faculty.

McRae agreed with the plan, saying, “People have a false sense of what constitutes parent involvement, connecting it solely to a parent’s presence or lack thereof on the school campus. Parent involvement also includes getting a student to school every day in clean clothes and ready to learn. If you look at attendance, and kids are showing up, that is a form of parent involvement.”

“I never looked at it that way,” Brown said, “but you are absolutely right. Our attendance has increased to 96 percent the past few months.”

“Isn’t that data?” asked McRae.



ALIGNING ACTION WITH GOALS

After more dialogue about how they could share and analyze the data with teachers and parents, the three of them reviewed professional development from the school year and plans for the next term. In too many cases, Brown acknowledged, training activities were not well aligned with the school improvement goals. She discussed the possibility of doing a “backwards design” review of the standards and learning objectives to help teachers improve their lesson planning.

“What development do you need to facilitate that process?” McRae asked.

“I need to break down the standards too,” Brown answered. “I need that lens so that I can spot what they’re doing in the classroom to provide immediate feedback.”

“How are you going to do that?” McRae persisted.

“I need to get in there and work through the standards with my teachers,” Brown said, after some reflection. “I think a lot of times we go to these training sessions with other administrators, but I need to do this with my teachers.”

MOVING BEYOND INTENTIONS TO ACTION

McRae then led her to the final move of a facilitative coach: “What would be a next step for you? If you want to get in there with your teachers, how will you do it?” Smiling in acknowledgement, Brown turned to her TimeTrack calendar and started planning the process.

CULTIVATING COURAGEOUS LEADERSHIP

Michael Bregy was a new high school principal when the SAM process was introduced 10 years ago to Community Unit School District 300 in Carpentersville, Illinois. He believes so much in the principal’s role as instructional leader that he used to spend days dressing like a teenager and taking classes so he could experience the student’s life first hand. One year he invited two high school students to serve on his SAM team. He later focused his doctoral dissertation on the SAM process and concluded that the principal’s buy-in was a crucial part of its success.

When he became superintendent of the Carpentersville district in 2010, Bregy said that a school board member told him, “every school should have SAM.’ Initially, I thought so, too. But after doing the research I’m not so sure that’s

an accurate statement.” He wants principals to choose to participate because fidelity to the process is essential to its effectiveness. “I think we might wish that every school had SAM, but it’s the type of program where if you don’t embrace it your results will be low. Just because your calendar says you are involved in instruction doesn’t mean you are doing it with any integrity.”

Participation is voluntary in Carpentersville. About half of the district’s principals have pursued SAM training. In some schools, assistant principals and division leaders also take part. “When I look at the 26 buildings (in the district), the top-performing, most effective principals are the ones involved in the SAM program,” Bregy said. “And that’s not just my bias. My colleagues will say, even if they don’t know who’s in the SAM process, ‘yes, those are the most effective principals.’”



My most effective and top performing principals are the ones involved in the *SAM* program.

At Lakewood School, first-year principal Asia Gurney made sure the SAM process followed her from Carpentersville Middle School, where she was among the first cadre of assistant principals in the district to receive the NSIP training, during the 2011-12 school year. At the start of her second semester at Lakewood in 2014, Gurney added Lakewood's two new assistant principals to the group.

Assistant Principal Lori Marshall said the SAM training not only taught her which duties actually qualify as instructional leadership but also how to respond to the various crises that inevitably interrupt her day. For example, when a student "had a meltdown" while she was observing the class, Marshall called a social worker in to help the student so she could stay to see the rest of the teacher's lesson.

Gurney said she is also learning how to do her job better with the help of SAM. She praised her coach, Bert Hende, for insisting that she "pre-calendar" her activities on TimeTrack rather than trying to account for them after the fact. It was a "breakthrough" moment when she realized she would be more likely to accomplish her goals if she scheduled specific ways to support them. According to the TimeTrack Progress Dashboard, she progressed from spending about 45 percent of the day on instructional leadership at the start of the school year to an average of 58 percent by the end of the year.

Gurney's SAM team consists of her secretary, Jabez Etienne, who schedules most of her appointments, and a Title 1 resource teacher, Nichole Murphy, who acts as her in-school coach. During one of their daily meetings in late spring, Murphy asked Gurney how she planned to delegate the data analysis duties for a new math curriculum, and she praised her for scheduling time for a lunch break each day that week. Together they then reviewed the SAM/Principal Team



Photo: SAM Lori Marshall, Assistant Principal, Lakewood School, Illinois.

Performance Rubric, which evaluates each administrator's progress in key areas. Gurney noted that one of her weaknesses was ensuring that the office staff knew how to appropriately intercept calls and visitors and reschedule them for times when she was not focusing on instructional support. She decided to conduct a formal training during the summer so she could model better responses.

During a follow-up meeting the next day, Hende helped Gurney and Murphy refine their analysis of the performance rubric. For example, she encouraged Gurney to share the TimeTrack calendar with office staff members so they would have a clearer understanding of the principal's schedule and to thoroughly explain the First Responders process so they would know the right person to ask for help.

To Murphy, the conversation was an important reminder of how SAM has helped change the dynamics of the school. Instead of letting random circumstances control the principal's day, the SAM team is learning how to be more strategic by putting systems into place and following a schedule that is focused on getting results.

"I love the structure of SAM. It makes you accountable," Murphy said. "With SAM you can really learn a lot about yourself within a year about how to be a more effective leader. This is a one-stop shop to become more successful. It gives you the support you need."



Photo: SAM Nicole Murphy, teacher, Lakewood School, Illinois.

A TAILORED APPROACH TO SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Michael Bregy, who recently left Carpentersville to become superintendent of North Shore District 112 in Illinois, said his longstanding partnership with NSIP “changed the trajectory of his career” by helping him refine his leadership skills and learn how to mentor other school leaders. Although there is no shortage of companies and organizations trying to offer school reform solutions, he said, NSIP stands out because of its customization, ongoing training, and follow-up. The program is designed to help principals identify unique answers and actions, rather than choose from a menu of preselected options.

Bregy said he’d like to find a way for all staff members, not just the SAM team, to routinely provide feedback and monitor the results of principals’ interventions. He’d also like NSIP to offer more guidance to principals about choosing appropriate SAMs to ensure that they are challenging school leaders, rather than enabling them. But overall, he believes the NSIP approach should be widely used by colleges, universities, and other principal preparation programs.

“It really is a way to improve your school,” he said.

NSIP has responded to requests from principal supervisors to adapt the TimeTrack system to better align with their coaching needs. In Hillsborough County, Florida, for example, Principal Supervisor Brenda Grasso said she appreciates being able to pilot a new version of TimeTrack that enables her to customize some of the calendar features to better reflect the professional competencies the district has adopted for school leaders.

“It really allows me to track the actual work I’m doing. Some of the descriptors that principals use mention student supervision. That wasn’t useful for my job,” Grasso said.

She’s excited about the potential of developing graphs and other visuals to show principals the results of the time they’ve spent working on various competencies and national leadership standards. Although she is new to the SAM process, Grasso said she has already realized the benefit of using it to guide change management.

“I’m definitely in more schools as a result of the SAM calendar. I’m more proactive and making better judgment calls,” said Grasso, who supervises 35 principals. “It will be very instrumental in improving the work that we do.”



“**SAM** is instrumental in improving the work that we do.”

Photo: Tricia McManus, Hillsborough County Public Schools Director of Leadership Development



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