

FLYPAPER

# The Achievement First story, part two: Big steps to a storybook ending?

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*Some of us were in the mode, ‘Fix it, fix it! Fix it tomorrow!’ You know when you feel nauseated and you just want it to stop. Our Chief Academic Officer, Tracy Epp, did a good job of slowing us down and saying, ‘I’m not going to take forever, but this is important enough that we are going to take a few months to figure this out.’*

*And we are going to bring our team together to generate all kinds of ideas and then we're going to make our bets.' And I think she slowed us down and brought more people on board to try to get the bets right.*

—Dacia Toll, co-CEO of Achievement First

Achievement First's deep dive into its academic programs led to the following conclusions:

### Key lessons learned

- **Picture of instruction:** Our instruction was overly-scaffolded for students. We needed to focus more on student thinking. Students needed to do more heavy lifting and struggle more.
- **Curriculum:** Curriculum matters—a lot. It needs to be unapologetically rigorous. You need to buy best-in-class resources or have a robust process for internal and external vetting of what you create.
- **Adult learning:** Student thinking will only be as good as teacher thinking. “**Intellectual prep**” is the core teacher activity to prepare to teach. Rather than focusing on general teacher moves, almost all PD is now **content-specific** and aligned to the lessons being taught (understanding big ideas, anticipating student misunderstandings, strong question sentences, etc.).
- **Real-time coaching:** We need to fix instruction NOW, not later. Jump in and help the teacher make the lesson better—and then debrief/practice afterwards.
- **School culture:** Variable across schools and it didn't always support learning. You can't win on culture alone, but you can lose on culture.

To move forward, Achievement First (AF) took four “Big Steps:”

**Implement a rigorous, core curriculum aligned to higher standards.** AF created a comprehensive set of instructional materials, scope-and-sequences, unit plans, and assessments that aim for a higher bar and promote student thinking. (*Note: AF created*

*its own curriculum, but this approach is not recommended for other school systems given the huge costs involved and the expertise required to do it well. Read more about alternatives here.)*

But AF made two additional investments that set this curriculum effort apart from others: the fundamentals of instruction (e.g., K–4 Math) and daily lesson resources (e.g., Third Grade Math). *(Note: All AF’s instructional resources are freely available in the Curriculum Hub—free login required.)*

Through the fundamentals of instruction, AF defines what excellent instruction looks like in classrooms where students do the majority of the intellectual heavy lifting. Few school systems go so far as to define excellent instruction, because it is controversial to do so?—it is hard for adults to align on teaching practice. But this common vision helps teachers understand how to implement the curriculum and it gives purpose to professional development and classroom coaching.

The daily lesson resources accompany each unit so that teachers can spend the bulk of their time intellectually preparing for lessons, not curating materials and designing curriculum.

**Devote more time to teacher and leader training, especially for intellectual preparation and rapid feedback.** As a second Big Step, Achievement First significantly increased its professional development for teachers and school leaders.

# Increase and Align PD for Leaders & Teachers

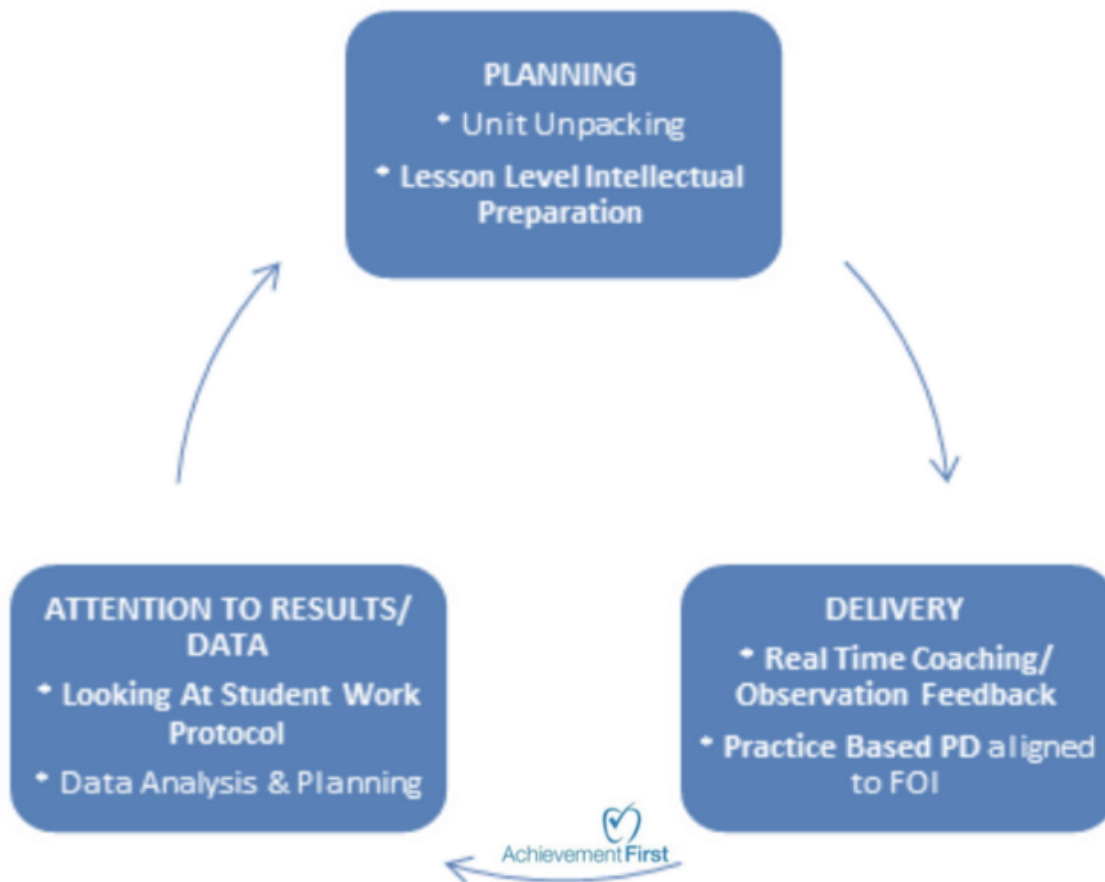
Event	Pre Big Steps	Big Steps!
New Leader	3 days	6 days
All Leader	3	9
New Teacher	3	9
All Teacher	12	13.5
Total	21 days	37.5 days

And professional development shifted from focusing on teacher moves, like classroom management techniques, to content-specific training where teachers and school leaders meet by subject area and practice intellectually preparing for lessons and looking at student work. “We do much less whole-staff PD of any sort,” says Toll. “It’s primarily content-specific now.”

Intellectual preparation (IPP) is a frequently used term at AF. IPP represents the preparation teachers do for each lesson to internalize the key teaching points, complete the tasks assigned to students, anticipate misunderstandings, prepare thought-provoking questions, and determine what makes for excellent student work. Here are examples of completed IPPs for social studies and math.

AF also made a huge shift to real-time, in-the-moment coaching, what they call “rapid feedback.” Toll explained, “We turned our instructional deans and our principals into personal trainers, so to speak, and, when they walk into classrooms, they coach teachers in real-time. This is a huge change but teachers way prefer it. It is far less judgmental, far more about fixing things for kids right now.”

# Teacher Development @ AF



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**Invest in data practices and looking at student work.** The third Big Step is about looking at actual student work. It is easy to focus on inputs like instructional materials and teacher moves, but AF learned the hard way that student outputs are equally important. There is no universally effective teaching strategy so looking at what students do is essential.

When AF looked at the practices of their highest-performing teachers, these educators were obsessed with looking at student work (LASW), often daily. And teams of educators developed faster when they analyzed work together (see LASW protocol here).

**Win on culture.** The final Big Step is about creating warm, demanding classrooms where learning is sacred *and* students feel deeply cared for.

The entire organization spends the first six weeks of school acclimating students to rigorous content while building positive classroom environments.

Areas of focus include:

- Do teachers and students show enthusiasm for learning in a classroom that feels positive?
- Are teachers building strong relationships with students? Are students building strong relationships with each other?
- Do students contribute to great classroom discourse by speaking at a volume where their ideas can be heard, expressing themselves in complete sentences, actively listening to others, and productively engaging with their peers?
- Are there shared expectations for student behavior across the school?

The six-week, Core Culture Foundation, is the first phase in Achievement First's Arc of the Year, a roadmap to help schools focus on the most important priorities throughout the year.

"You can't win on culture alone," says Co-CEO and Superintendent Doug McCurry, "but you can lose on culture."

### **A storybook ending?**

With herculean effort, Achievement First implemented the Big Steps during the 2014–2015 school year.

And student achievement...fell in both English and math.

"So [the Big Steps are] the direction we are going in and we're going, we're going, we're going..." says McCurry. "Then I open up the newspaper and I'm like, 'Ah, fudge,' we are headed in the wrong direction."

Read Part 1 and Part 3 of Achievement First's journey here.

*Editor's note: This piece originally appeared in a slightly different form on the Charter School Growth Fund's blog.*

*The views expressed herein represent the opinions of the author and not necessarily the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.*

*POLICY PRIORITY: HIGH EXPECTATIONS*

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