

# FEBRUARY WATERFALL LEARNING LEADERSHIP SHOWCASE

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**Jenny Rothboeck**, a veteran leader with over a decade of experience as the principal of East Grand Middle School, is no stranger to innovation and determination. Known for her commitment to educational excellence, she championed initiatives like project-based learning and in-school clubs for all students, ensuring equitable access to enriching activities. But the pandemic revealed unexpected cracks in her leadership approach, challenging her to dig deep, reflect, and ultimately redefine her role as a leader.

“One of my biggest pet peeves is that a lot of professional development for adults in education ignores everything we know about engagement and learning,” Jenny reflects.

## Hitting the Wall

The aftermath of the pandemic brought mounting challenges: declining student attendance, a noticeable drop in academic rigor, and a dip in staff morale. Complaints began to pile up—issues like climate, culture, and engagement seemed to dominate the conversation.

## *When The System Gets in the Way of True Collaboration*

By Chris Briggs-Hale, Waterfall Learning

Jenny found herself at a crossroads. Despite her efforts to include staff through a traditional leadership team structure, she was overwhelmed by the need to manage crises while still striving to be an instructional leader. That’s when she had a breakthrough:

“I realized the very leadership team structure I’d put into place to increase staff input was actually getting in the way of real collaboration.”

## Flipping the Script

Determined to make a change, Jenny made a bold decision: she dissolved the existing building leadership team. Instead, she implemented a system where all staff members took an active role in decision-making. In a pivotal moment of vulnerability and strength, Jenny invited her team to name their biggest challenges and self-organize into workgroups.



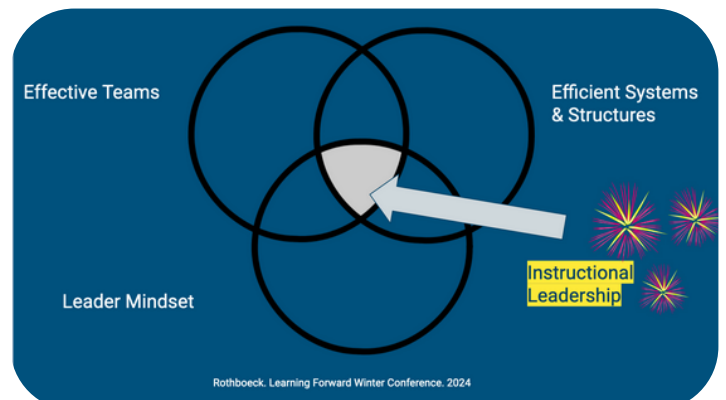
During this time, Jenny partnered with **Scott Murphy, PEBC's Director of Leadership**, who served as a skilled facilitator. With Scott's guidance, the team approached collaboration with intentionality and structure, ensuring their work-groups didn't just brainstorm solutions but also set clear goals, timelines, and processes to monitor progress.

This iterative process gave teachers autonomy and created a platform for them to use their expertise in addressing critical issues like attendance, behavior, climate, and family engagement.

"What I learned was that true collaboration doesn't come from representatives passing along feedback—it comes when everyone has a stake and a voice in the work," Jenny shares. Drawing from research by leaders like Peter M. DeWitt (Collaborative Leadership) and findings from the Wallace Foundation, Jenny embraced distributed leadership. This approach, combined with Scott's ongoing leadership coaching and facilitation, enabled staff to take ownership of initiatives while Jenny focused on supporting their growth through instructional leadership and Cognitive Coaching.

## Informed by Research

Jenny Rothboeck's leadership transformation was grounded in robust educational research. Studies demonstrate that effective principals positively influence school climate, foster collaboration, and manage resources efficiently. Research also highlights that distributed leadership fosters bottom-up innovation and empowers individuals to lead meaningful change within their organizations. This approach aligns with transformational leadership principles, emphasizing empowerment and shared accountability. By adopting distributed leadership and creating space for teacher-driven initiatives, Jenny redefined collaborative leadership, enabling all stakeholders to contribute to the school's success.



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***95% agreed professional learning opportunities are reinforced through coaching (+30% from 2022 on the TLCC)***



## Results and Impact

The results of Jenny's bold shift were nothing short of transformative. Her leadership and her decision to lead or co-lead all professional development sessions during the 2023-2024 school year resulted in remarkable progress, as evidenced by the CDE Teaching and Learning Conditions Colorado (TLCC) survey results:

- 95% of staff agreed they receive ongoing support and coaching to improve their practice (+30% from 2022).
- 84% responded favorably about professional development supporting the effective use of student data (+4%).
- 100% agreed professional development supports students' social-emotional learning (+14%).
- 95% agreed professional learning opportunities are reinforced through coaching (+30%).
- 96% of staff would recommend the school as a good place to work (+1%).
- 100% of staff believe the school is a good place for students to learn (+4%).

On the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI):

- 63% of students in Spring 2023 agreed or strongly agreed that they have a relationship with a trusted adult at school, up from 55% in Spring 2022.
- Neutral responses dropped from 33% in 2022 to 24% in 2023.

These improvements reflect the intentional focus on fostering trust and connection. Jenny attributes part of the success to in-school clubs, which allowed staff and students to build meaningful relationships beyond the traditional classroom setting.

Jenny's leadership demonstrates the power of a clear vision, collaborative professional development, and relationship-building to drive sustainable change in school culture and climate.

### Endnotes:

1. Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H. (2010). Leadership for learning: Does collaborative leadership make a difference in school improvement? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 38(6), 654–678. [Source](#).
2. Harris, A., & Jones, M. (2019). Distributed leadership and organizational change: Reviewing the evidence. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 47(3), 346–363. [Source](#).

## A Bold Vision for School Leadership

**Scott Murphy, Director of Leadership for PEBC**, reflects on Jenny's team's success.

"Jenny's own curiosity, humility and reflection opened the door to her own growth and transformation," he says. "Jenny's courage to hone and refine her leadership skills were both a model for as well as the catalyst for the transformation with her staff and students"

"I would never go back to how I used to try to engage teacher collaboration," Jenny says today. Her journey exemplifies the power of vulnerability, reflection, and a willingness to change. With Scott Murphy's support, Jenny flipped the script on traditional leadership structures and fostered a culture of innovation, inclusion, and shared ownership that transformed her school.

Jenny's story, coupled with Scott's ongoing contributions, is a powerful reminder that real collaboration starts with trust, empowerment, and a commitment to listening—and that even experienced leaders can reinvent themselves to meet the needs of their team and students.

### For More Information:

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