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# The Forte Way: A Coaching Case Study during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Located in one of the most culturally diverse and resource-deprived neighborhoods in the Queens borough of New York City, Forte Preparatory Academy produces middle school graduates who have consistently outperformed their peers. The school, serving a population where 90 percent of the students receive free or reduced lunch and both the special education and English language learner populations exceed City averages, boasts a world-class education that prepares students to matriculate into the best high schools in the city. In May 2021, the teaching staff at Forte participated in the Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES) (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001), which captured the teachers' perceptions of efficacy in three different areas, or factors: Student Engagement, Instructional Strategies, and Classroom Management. The Forte data exist as a fraction of a larger data set that is being used to inform the relationship, if any, of a teacher's race, gender, experience, or assigned grade level on the three factors examined in the instrument. In this case study, we examine one instructional improvement initiative that the staff members attribute to their successes.

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## THE ROLE OF EFFICACY IN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

As described by Donohoo, et al. (2018), teacher efficacy is the single most important predictor of student achievement, yielding more than three times greater predictive ability than socioeconomic status. Forwarding the literature of teacher efficacy (Dembo & Gibson, 1985; Donohoo et al., 2018; Donohoo et al., 2020; Fives & Buehl, 2009; Siwatu, 2011; Siwatu et al., 2017; Stewart, 2012; Wolters & Daugherty, 2007), our research aims to highlight the actions taken at Forte at the height of instructional pivots brought on by COVID-19 and remote learning.

Within a few weeks of COVID-19 spreading feverishly throughout the U.S., states quickly pivoted their instructional delivery to service students while conforming to health guidelines. In New York City, schools closed quickly and teachers were given one week to redesign instruction to provide lessons remotely. School instruction, culture and rules all changed virtually overnight. By large, New York City teachers were left out of the coordination of digital devices to students and allowed to focus solely on delivering quality virtual instruction of the same caliber as their in-person instruction. The task was not easy. School was disrupted. Homes were disrupted. Countless lives were lost. Through all the changes and extraordinary circumstances, teachers were tasked with serving students. Despite the changes in instructional delivery,

the teachers of Forte Academy maintained a high level of self-reported efficacy.

Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004) define collective efficacy as the unified staff perception to make positive change in students' educational outcomes. Essentially, if and when teachers believe that they can have a lasting impact, their collective beliefs and actions result in increased collaboration, increased positive school culture, and shared practices that yield increased student achievement. An extensive literature of the benefits of collective cultural efficacy preceded the pandemic (Adams & Forsyth, 2006; Bandura, 1977, 1993, 1997; R. Goddard, 2002; R. D. Goddard et al., 2004; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). Long before COVID-19 altered teaching and learning in school buildings, school leaders sought out ways to build a sense of efficacy as a method to foster positive school culture and increase student achievement.

To that end, we utilized the Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001) that allowed us to review self-reported efficacy at Forte across three factors: Student Engagement, Instructional Strategies, and Classroom Management. Using the 24-question long form, we were able to segment the Forte case by a variety of comparative variables (race, experience, gender and teacher-assigned grade level). The lessons learned from Forte Academy show ways that school culture and efficacy can be forged despite exceptional circumstances. We intend to use these data to not only inform future professional development but also get a



TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF RESPONDENTS AND AVERAGES

Category	Count	%	TSES Factor Averages			
			Overall Average	Student Engagement	Instructional Strategies	Classroom Management
Total	42	100%	7.34	7.05	7.28	7.69
Race						
American Indian or Alaska Native	3	7%	6.96	7.08	6.38	7.42
Asian	3	7%	7.71	7.17	7.83	8.13
Black or African American	12	29%	7.64	7.17	7.48	8.28
Other	2	5%	7.52	7.06	7.63	7.88
White	22	52%	7.16	6.97	7.19	7.32
Gender						
Male	15	36%	7.19	6.88	7.04	7.64
Female	27	64%	7.42	7.14	7.41	7.71
Experience						
0-3 years	13	31%	7.29	7.06	7.21	7.61
4-7 years	17	40%	7.54	7.10	7.55	7.96
8-11 years	9	21%	7.56	7.02	7.56	8.11
12+ years	3	7%	7.73	7.81	7.50	7.68
Grades taught						
5	9	21%	7.56	7.22	7.64	7.81
6	11	26%	7.74	7.66	7.44	8.13
7	9	21%	7.25	6.72	7.50	7.53
8	7	17%	6.68	6.39	6.68	6.96
Multi-grade	6	14%	7.18	6.94	6.81	7.79

better understanding of the trends within the variables at Forte and potentially other NYC schools.

## EVIDENCE FROM FORTE PREPARATORY ACADEMY

Table 1 shows select descriptive statistics from Forte Preparatory Academy. We obtained a 100 percent response rate from teachers at the school by administering TSES during a professional development session. We show the preliminary TSES results by using the averages accumulated. Each respondent answered all 24 questions regarding aspects of job performance with numeric values ranging from 1 to 9, where 1 indicates “Not at All” and 9 indicates “A Great Deal.” Teachers at Forte averaged 7.34 (out of 9) overall, indicating the teachers cumulatively feel “Quite a Bit” effective at their jobs. The Forte teachers (on average) felt the most

effective (comparatively) in managing their classrooms, with an average of 7.69 and the least effective engaging students, with an average of 7.05. Based on the way the coaching initiative is structured at Forte, which is detailed in the next section, it is encouraging that the teachers collectively feel most effective in classroom management.

We also examined averages across different sub-populations of teachers: race, gender, experience, and the number of different grades the teachers taught. Here, we use:

- *Race and Gender* as demographic variables of interest for professional development.
- *Experience* as a Human Capital variable where more experienced teachers are assumed to be more effective (Ost, 2014).
- *Grades Taught* as an indicator if the teacher is



responsible for teaching multiple grades, and therefore more students with more resources are required.

Notable trends in the subgroups include:

- The higher averages in Classroom Management across all subgroups may speak to the efficacy of the coaching program at Forte.
- There may be complicated racial components that are not sufficiently captured using averages. As a school with an extremely diverse student population, we need more specific information on not only the teachers but also the students in order to make any significant conclusions about race as an indicator of efficacy.
- Female teachers had higher averages across the board than male teachers.
- In general, more experienced teachers reported feeling more effective, versus their less experienced counterparts. The overall average increased as more experience was added, but that trend did not hold across the TSES factors. For example, teachers with 12 years or more of experience had the highest averages in Student Engagement, but teachers with 8-11 years of experience had the highest averages in Instructional Strategies and Classroom Management.

Although this preliminary analysis is a part of a larger, more in-depth synthesis, we used descriptive statistics coupled with qualitative data obtained via semi-structured focus groups to provide immediately usable data for the Forte team. While one reason for administering the survey was to give the Forte administration an idea of how their teachers were feeling about their efficacy, especially with the complications of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was also an exercise in gathering grade level and content-specific needs in each of the three factor areas to drive professional development. More concretely, the leadership team was able to review the anonymous outcomes of the 24-item survey and review the averages for each item. For example, the low averages (comparatively) for eighth grade teachers highlight potential professional development for teachers at that grade level.

### ***A Coaching Model for Success***

While there are several observable actions of teachers and leaders that contribute to a healthy school community and positive teacher sense of self-efficacy, Forte's intensive coaching model surfaced not only as one of the most frequently articulated attributes to success across administrators and teachers, but also as one of the most unique features of Forte's professional development program. As detailed below, each individual

teacher is enveloped in support from a coaching team and leadership guidance. The coaching guidance and leadership structures work harmoniously to provide both first-year and experienced teachers support in instructional delivery and classroom management. See Figure 1.

**FIGURE 1**

**The Forte Coaching and Leadership Model**



### ***Frequent and Timely Feedback***

Coaching begins at the start of the school year in what is called the “8-week push.” During the first two months of the academic year, the coaching team (composed of teacher leaders, leadership team members, and dedicated instructional coaches) spends a significant amount of time in each classroom, reviewing student data and determining needs for the year. The baselines that are drawn at the onset of the school year drive the coaching program in subsequent months. During the initial meetings, teachers lead their personal goal development with their coaches and the school community determines school goals.

Once targets are set from the baseline data, the coaches provide consistent feedback on the teacher lesson plans and classroom teaching. Each week, teachers receive up to three, short, informal observations from their coaches, who provide immediate written feedback with successes and instructional “pushes” for subsequent lessons. During biweekly, data-driven meetings, teachers and coaches work together to review trends that either surfaced in the teachers’ lesson plans or during the classroom observations. The coaching is grounded in the targets that were collaboratively set at the start of

the year. One teacher credits “the attention to detail” prevalent in feedback to their growth as a successful teacher (Anonymous Teacher 22, 2021).

The leadership team at Forte conducts what they refer to as the School Review at the midpoint of the school year. During this time, the leadership team “zooms out” to gain insight into the school’s progress toward goals and the weekly coaching is fine-tuned to target school-based needs (Anonymous Leadership 02, 2021).

### *Consistent Professional Development*

Professional development is an integral part of the Forte structure. “Other than intentional opportunities to recharge, professional development is never canceled” (Anonymous Teacher 13, 2021). Professional development is categorized as any series of training sessions that build pedagogical skill, affirm positive school culture or review resources that result in improved teacher quality and effectiveness. Training begins with teachers during the summer. Forte’s current principal explains that summer professional development provides teachers with a set of skills that allow them to easily manage classroom behavior early in the school year so they can focus all of the available instructional time on teaching and learning. School-wide professional development occurs weekly for two hours.

### *High Expectations*

A common theme articulated among the staff is a high level of expectation, referred to as the Forte Way. The Forte Way can be described as a resolute dedication to instructional improvements and steadfast devotion to the achievement of all students. Teachers who remain at Forte for over three years explain that the Forte Way comes as easily as walking. Those teachers reflect that in their first few years they spent a significant amount of time learning the structures and processes of the school. The Forte Way includes shared language, ritualized processes to manage classroom behaviors, and specific expectations to provide instruction.

### *Collaborative Community with a Growth Mindset*

Along with teacher efficacy, positive mindset has been credited as one of the most influential factors of student success. Forte does not fall short in specific structures and actions that cultivate positive mindset and community. From their intentional use of social media that showcases students’ talents to the daily use of Slack to keep practitioners connected and apprised of immediate students’ needs, the systems that Forte put in place to nurture positive community and growth mindset set them apart and positively contribute to the success of their academic program.



## TAKING STEPS FORWARD

With all studies, the research design is subject to certain limitations, and our study is no different. For example, by intentionally using a questionnaire-based data collection tool like TSES, we are opening ourselves to various biases of not only the target response pool (teachers), but also biases in our interpretation of the data. While teacher efficacy scales are widely used tools in education research, we believe the incorporation of a factor that addresses Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education, adopted within the last five years by New York State, can enrich the results.

The goal of our Forte case study and future teacher efficacy work is to provide timely feedback that also helps us understand the intricacies of evaluating education-based outcome variables. As we work with primary, middle, and high schools in New York City, we aim to build a replicable efficacy model that school administrators can use in their schools to nurture teacher sense of efficacy and thus student achievement.

There is an established positive correlation between teacher sense of efficacy and student achievement. Teacher sense of efficacy does not manifest without the support and guidance of effective leadership teams. It is incumbent upon school leadership to design school processes and systems that nurture teacher confidence and reify teacher success. At Forte, that work is done, in part, through a carefully constructed instructional coaching program that provides teachers with individualized support.

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