

CASE STUDY:

Accelerating Student Mastery Through “Real Time” Adjustments in Teaching

Learning to Apply High Impact Leadership Strategies at Henderson Collegiate



The Challenge

Henderson Collegiate, a rural charter network in North Carolina serving more than 1,300 students, has maintained an impressive track record of student achievement—including a 100% college acceptance rate for its graduates. Still, leaders saw room to grow in how they could accelerate learning while deepening students’ understanding.

The Solution

School and network leaders adapted tools and practices learned from Relay GSE to build capacity across the network’s three schools to monitor for evidence of student learning in real time and make immediate instructional adjustments by:

- Making a paradigm shift in coaching—from focusing primarily on teacher actions to

analyzing student learning as the basis for feedback and instructional change;

- Adapting collaborative planning to zero in on the most important student learning goals and align on how to check for and respond to evidence of mastery in the moment;
- Drawing on a coaching model with an aligned methodology, principal supervisors were able to effectively guide principals in coaching both teachers and instructional leaders;
- Reinforcing a culture of feedback and continuous improvement by celebrating growth in the moment—at every level of the system.

As a result, leaders report a clearer, more immediate focus among teachers and school leaders on ensuring student mastery—and signs that students are showing deeper understanding in their work and discourse.

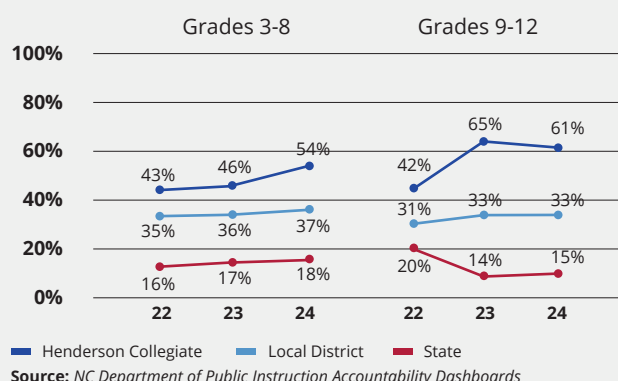
Hendercon Collegiate K-12 | Henderson, NC

**Co-Founders: Carice Sanchez, Eric Sanchez;
Graduates of Relay GSE:**

- National Principals Academy
- Leverage Leadership Institute

Students	1,330
Economically disadvantaged	86%
Students of color	90%

College & Career Ready (Scoring Level 4-5) Combined ELA+Math Results



Henderson Collegiate shows how focused instructional coaching on monitoring student learning deepens mastery

In a 9th grade biology classroom, Principal Taro Shigenobu navigates his way through the rows of student tables, clipboard in hand, eyes on their notebooks, ears tuned to their partner talk.

After checking every student, he meets his supervisor, Carice Sanchez, at the back of the room. With a whisper, he reports: students are on task—but many aren't yet demonstrating a clear grasp of the core concept: the idea that environmental factors can affect gene expression.

Sanchez nods and gives him the go-ahead to confer with the teacher, Jaimi Semper, and see if she's noticed the same—and is ready to respond.

Scenes like this are unfolding daily across Henderson Collegiate's three schools, where leaders aim to build on a strong record of student success. By monitoring learning in real time and responding to gaps in understanding, the rural North Carolina network is deepening mastery while accelerating progress.

Adopting strategies from Relay GSE, leaders at Henderson Collegiate are zeroing in on what students most need to master—and how to help them get there as efficiently as possible. Sanchez coaches principals, who then coach teachers and other instructional leaders to spot and address learning gaps in the moment.

The payoff, says Shigenobu, is powerful: "You don't have to wait until you're grading the exit ticket to realize students didn't get it. You can see it in the moment and adjust—right then—so they don't leave with the wrong idea."

"We flipped our paradigm"

Sanchez says the practice marks a major shift at Henderson Collegiate. "We flipped our paradigm in the way that we thought before," she explains. "It used to be just go into the classroom and focus on the teacher to get the teacher better. Now... it's sharpening the lens of 'just go straight to student work.' And when you look at student work and identify the gap, that's going to help you determine how to get the teacher and the leader better in that moment."

For Henderson Collegiate, the shift wasn't a course correction—it was the next big move. Founded in 2010 by Eric and Carice Sanchez—who began teaching in surrounding Vance County—Henderson Collegiate opened with a single fourth-grade class. It has since grown into a K-12 network serving over 1,300 students, nearly all of whom are Black or Hispanic and from low-income backgrounds.

As alumni of Relay's Leadership Academies and Leverage Leadership Institute, Eric and Carice realized that a key driver of the school's success is the culture of continuous improvement its leaders built from the start. Collaborative lesson planning, real-time coaching, and regular feedback aren't add-ons—they're how school works. "We have teachers who will find you after you've been in their room—even if you're just popping in—and say, 'What'd you think? What could I have tightened up?'" Sanchez says.

Still, the team saw room to grow—especially in pushing toward deeper understanding. "We've been a high-performing school for years," says Shigenobu. "But this work is helping us punch through the ceiling—to push kids even further, especially in how deeply they understand the content."

“You don’t have to wait until you’re grading the exit ticket to realize students didn’t get it. You can see it in the moment and adjust—right then—so they don’t leave with the wrong idea.”

—Taro Shigenobu, High School Principal



Real-Time Coaching to Strengthen Student Understanding

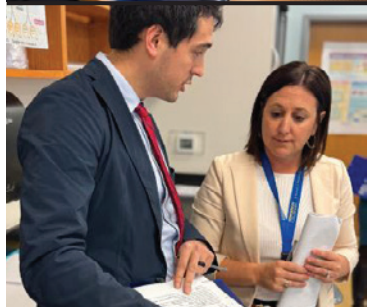
Learning accelerates when gaps are surfaced and addressed on the spot. At Henderson Collegiate, leaders use tools and practices from Relay GSE to coach teachers on how to check for and address misconceptions in real time—seen here as Principal Supervisor Carice Sanchez guides Principal Taro Shigenobu in coaching a biology teacher on a genetics lesson.



1. Aligning on Focus: Examining the lesson plan, related standards, and student data, Sanchez and Shigenobu align on:

- What key understanding are students likely to struggle with?
- How can the teacher check for and ensure that understanding?
- How will he coach the teacher to do so?

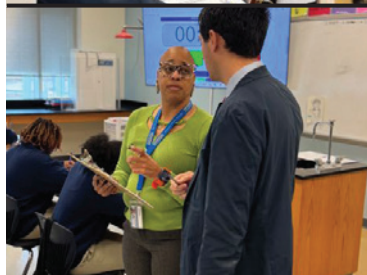
They zero in on epigenetics—when environmental factors affect gene expression—and script how to coach the teacher to solidify the key idea.



2. Checking for Engagement and Understanding: After entering the classroom, Shigenobu makes two laps around the students to check:

- Are all engaged with notebooks out and on task?
- Do their notes and discussions show evidence of understanding?

He confers with Sanchez after each lap; they agree students are engaged but unclear that DNA stays the same even when environmental factors alter gene expression, and plan how he'll prompt the teacher to clarify it.



3. Coaching with Prompts: While students continue working, Shigenobu checks in with the teacher to clarify her next move, asking:

- What evidence do you see of students' understanding?
- How will you bring them back to ensure they've mastered it?

They agree students are still unclear on how epigenetics differs from mutations, and the teacher shares her plan to reinforce the concept before moving on.



4. Coaching by Modeling: The teacher asks students to define epigenetics, but Shigenobu knows more is needed and briefly leads the class. He has students discuss why a clone might not look like the original, then asks:

- "With a mutation, what happens to the DNA?" (Students: "It changes.")
- "With epigenetics, is the DNA changed?" (Students: "It's the same.")

To drive home the point, he flicks the light switch on and off: "The gene stays the same, but the environment turns on or off how it's expressed."



5. Locking in the Learning: After his model, Shigenobu huddles with Sanchez and the teacher, asking the latter:

- "What did you see and hear me do?"

"The teacher names his key moves, prompting Sanchez to praise her quick uptake. Her feedback to Shigenobu: Offer to model a practice as soon as it would help. All three see the lesson as a win. Says Shigenobu: "We knew what the most productive struggle would be and we were able to close it."

“Something kids are still struggling with...”

The process starts by getting clear on what students most need to understand, how to know if they do, and how to help them if they don't. The coach and the person they're supporting—whether a teacher, school leader, or another coach—meet to examine a lesson plan and identify the point of most productive struggle: a concept or skill that's both challenging and essential.

For the recent biology lesson, Shigenobu and Sanchez homed in on epigenetics—the idea that environmental factors can affect gene expression without changing DNA. Shigenobu, who had seen the topic on state exams and in summer remediation, flagged it as both essential and likely to trip students up.

“The gap is understanding the difference between mutations and epigenetics,” he tells his supervisor. “With mutations, the DNA is literally changing—which can happen. But sometimes, through gene expression, different traits show up without the DNA changing.” They then linked the confusion to the teacher's action that could resolve it: a clear stamp of the distinction. By the end of the meeting, they had a detailed plan for what Shigenobu would look for in the classroom and how he'd help the teacher address student misconceptions if needed.

Stepping in sooner to move forward faster

The preparation's payoff becomes clear in the classroom. After confirming students are confused

by epigenetics, Shigenobu confers with Semper about her plan to clarify it. Then he steps aside to observe. The teacher prompts students to return to their notes and the text and define the concept. As they work, Shigenobu again checks notebooks and listens in—still noting signs of confusion. He returns to the teacher and offers to model the stamp.

Calling students back he says: “I'd like to jump in real quickly.”

He directs them to their notes and asks why a cloned pet might differ from the original: “Use the language of epigenetics to support your answer.” After some partner talk, he presses them to contrast mutation with epigenetics. “When you have a mutation, what's happening to the DNA?” he asked. “Now—what about epigenetics?” When a student says: “It's exactly the same,” her classmates signal agreement.

Shigenobu delivers the stamp: “The DNA doesn't change—but its expression can.” To make it stick, he flips the lights on and off. “The gene stays the same; the environment turns on or off its expression.” He has students paraphrase it to their partners—this time with more precision.

Shigenobu returns to the teacher for a quick debrief. With Sanchez listening, he invites her to recount his model and how it helped students—a key step in learning the instructional practice. Sanchez praises her keen observation and gives Shigenobu feedback: step in sooner when modeling would help move learning forward more quickly.

All three see a win: Sanchez sharpened the principal's coaching, he helped the teacher build a



new skill, and students mastered a tough concept. Says Shigenobu: “We knew what the most productive struggle would be, and we were able to close it.”

“A practice that makes everyone better”

What played out in the biology classroom is what Henderson Collegiate aims to multiply in every classroom.

Sanchez says several conditions make the shift effective. A focus on grade-level standards, collaboration, and regular observation and feedback were already in place when they moved to coaching around such real-time adjustments based on evidence of student learning. Students must be engaged—and with the right content—for teachers and leaders to spot the right evidence and respond appropriately.

And by elevating expert teachers as part-time coaches, the network ensures every teacher

is supported by someone with subject-matter expertise.

With those things in place, Sanchez says they were ready to go from great to greater—by continually shrinking the time between student confusion and deep understanding. Preliminary data from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction suggest it’s working. Network-wide, the percentage of students scoring proficient (at least a level 3) on state assessments grew from 72% to 80% from 2024 to 2025 in English Language Arts, and from 83% to 87% in Math.

Sanchez attributes much of the gain to their work around real-time response to student learning: “It’s a practice that makes everyone better—because it’s helping the teacher get better in the moment, it’s helping the leader get better at noticing what’s happening in the classroom, and it’s helping the kids, because they’re getting what they need.”



High-Leverage Strategies to Accelerate Student Learning

To accelerate student learning and deepen understanding, Henderson Collegiate applies these leadership strategies learned from Relay across its K–12 network—focusing on real-time monitoring of student learning and immediate instructional response:

- **Centering lesson planning and coaching** on evidence of student learning and alignment to grade-level academic standards.
- **Prioritizing productive struggle** by identifying the concepts most likely to challenge students and yield deeper understanding.
- **Pre-planning precise checks and responses** by anticipating student misconceptions and preparing in-the-moment actions to resolve them.
- **Aligning instructional coaching** in which network leaders coach principals to coach teachers and others instructional leaders in the same core practice.
- **Practicing responsive school leadership** that stays close to instruction—observing, modeling, and celebrating clear moments of professional growth.

Learn more about Relay GSE's instructional leadership development programs at: www.relay.edu/professional-education/leadership-programs

