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CASE STUDY

# Distance-Learning Breakthroughs

*Getting Results and Building Capacity at LAUSD South (CA)*

*by John J-H Kim, Kathleen Choi, Lander Arrieta, and DJ Cervantes*

Originally published in the *District Management Journal*, v.28, Winter 2021

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On Friday, March 13, 2020, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Superintendent Austin Buetner announced that all LAUSD schools would close as of Monday, March 16, due to the COVID-19 pandemic; in-person instruction would be replaced with online learning for the almost 700,000 students in the district. Michael Romero, superintendent of Local District South, one of six local districts in LAUSD, wanted to make sure students in his district continued to learn and make progress during this period of online learning. Anticipating the possibility that distance learning might have to continue into the fall, Romero chose to view the situation as an opportunity for teachers to innovate and learn how to implement distance learning effectively.

## The DMBreakthroughTeams Approach: Encouraging Focus, Creativity, and Skill Building

Distance learning was a new experience for most teachers, staff, students, and families in Local District South, and it was thrust upon them with little notice. Romero pondered how he could energize his teams, ensure a focus on results, and encourage creativity and skill building during this very challenging time.

Romero reflected on the success the district had had in previous years using DMGroup's DMBreakthroughTeams approach. Working in teams over a 10-week period, teachers and administrators had successfully achieved measurable results and built leadership and teamwork



**Michael Romero**  
Superintendent of Los Angeles Unified District South

skills. But that work had been done pre-pandemic. And, almost all of the meetings had been in person, which seemed central to fostering collaboration and cohesion. Could something like this approach be carried out successfully online?

## What Is the DMBreakthroughTeams Approach?

The core concept of the DMBreakthroughTeams approach is that the most powerful way to develop leaders is for people to learn leadership skills while working to achieve real performance results, rather than just being taught about leadership.

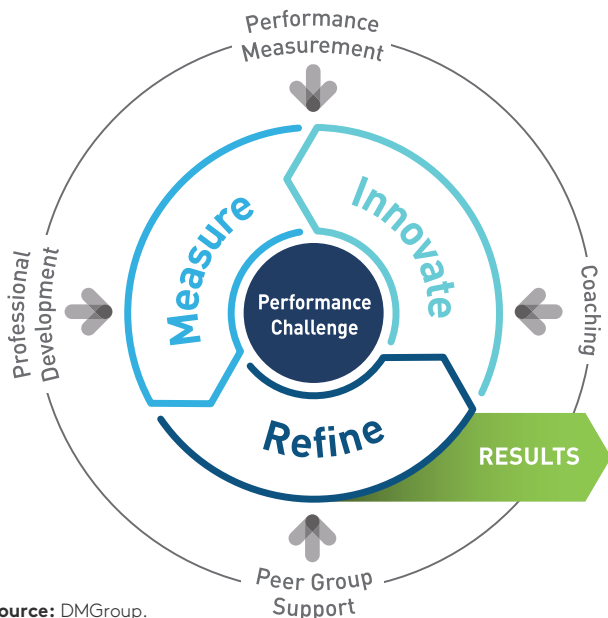
In DMGroup’s work applying this approach to the public education sector, a district or school typically launches multiple teams simultaneously, with each team composed of a cross-functional group of five to seven members. Each breakthrough team sets about identifying a performance goal with specific measurable targets to achieve within a short time frame — usually approximately 10 weeks. The DMBreakthroughTeams approach pushes teams to iterate in rapid cycles. Teams develop innovative strategies, test and track weekly progress, refine their approaches, and continue to iterate with the objective of reaching their goals. Targeted professional development and just-in-time performance coaching support the teams in developing the skills needed to address challenges and overcome obstacles (*Exhibit 1*).

## Local District South Pilots Virtual DMBreakthroughTeams Work

Although it had never been attempted before, DMGroup believed the DMBreakthroughTeams approach could be delivered virtually. Romero decided it was worth a try, but given that only half the semester was left, a 10-week cycle was not feasible. He and DMGroup agreed to push ahead with six teams from Local District South and see what could be accomplished in just eight weeks.

The results have been extraordinary. Even though the teams never got to meet in person with each other or with their

*Exhibit 1* DMBREAKTHROUGHTEAMS APPROACH



Source: DMGroup.

# DMBreakthroughTeams

## Building Leadership Capacity and Getting Results

The DMBreakthroughTeams approach is a fast-paced way to activate on-the-job learning and build leadership capacity while making measurable progress on pressing district challenges.

### How the DMBreakthroughTeams approach works:

- ▶ **Districts or schools typically launch multiple teams simultaneously, with each team composed of a cross-functional group of five to seven members.**
- ▶ **Each breakthrough team identifies a performance objective to achieve with a short time frame – usually 10 weeks.**
- ▶ **Based on the performance objective, teams formulate SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Aggressive yet Attainable, Relevant, and Time-Bound) that are highly specific and relevant to the team members.**
- ▶ **Teams then test innovative strategies, track weekly progress, learn quickly from successes and failures, and iterate in rapid cycles to achieve results.**
- ▶ **Just-in-time performance coaching and targeted professional development help team members develop the skills needed to address challenges and overcome obstacles.**

DMBreakthroughTeams achieve results for the district while building skills and leadership capacity. Participating in the DMBreakthroughTeams provides on-the-job experience, targeted professional development, and coaching to build meaningful and enduring skills.

“ *These teams not only achieved their stated performance objectives but also successfully increased engagement as part of their efforts.* ”

DMGroup coaches and had barely eight weeks to work on their performance challenge instead of the usual ten weeks, five of the six teams achieved their performance goal:

- **Increased graduation rate at Fremont High School to 95%**; this was higher than the previous year's graduation rate of 92%
- **Increased Algebra 1 proficiency from 43% to 71%** and increased engagement at Banning High School
- **Improved math scores from 26% to 74%** and increased engagement at Wilmington Middle School
- **Improved Geometry proficiency from 36% to 78%** and increased engagement at University Medical Magnet
- **Improved Algebra scores from 66% to 89%** and increased engagement at University Medical Magnet
- **Increased engagement and improved Geometry performance from 34% to 67%**, short of the goal of 78%, at Bethune Middle School

Through their work, the teams unlocked improved approaches to remote instruction and learning, which could be shared more broadly. Below we examine the breakthrough team work at Fremont High School to increase graduation rates and at Banning High School to increase math achievement. These teams not only achieved their stated performance objectives but also successfully increased engagement as part of their efforts.

## CASE STUDY I

### Record-Level Graduation Rates at Fremont High School



The team at Fremont High School was very concerned about the effect school closing would have on graduation rates. The prior year's graduation rate was 92%, but in March 2020 when the school building closed, the graduation rate for the year was projected to be 80%. Normally, seniors at risk of not graduating have a daily 50-minute advisory session to help guide, monitor, and encourage them to complete the necessary course requirements to graduate on time. But how could counselors and teachers hope to engage these students, who were already well behind in their coursework, now that students could no longer come to school? How could Fremont hope to engage them online and get them to finish the coursework needed to graduate?

Fremont High School assembled a breakthrough team comprising 10 cross-functional members:

- Principal
- Assistant Principal
- Four counselors
- Four content teachers

When selecting members for breakthrough teams, DMGroup emphasizes the importance of choosing those closest to the work; selecting team members based on seniority or title can derail efforts. Those closest to the work can best identify solutions and test these ideas most effectively. Team members are also specifically selected based on their eagerness to learn and their openness to innovate and work collaboratively. The approach relies upon teams' learning to function as a unit and developing mutual accountability as they iterate, work through challenges, and hopefully ultimately succeed.

### Setting a Performance Challenge Goal

Looking at the list of students who were at risk of not graduating, the team identified 80 students who still needed to successfully complete between one and five courses to graduate. If they focused on these 80 students and could get 73 to pass the needed courses, the team could increase last year's graduation rate by 3 percentage points, from 92% to 95%.

So, they committed to a SMART (Specific, Measurable, Aggressive yet Attainable, Relevant, and Time-Bound) goal, expressed as follows:

### SMART GOAL

*Seventy-three out of 80 students currently missing one or more A-G courses will complete all A-G courses on Edgenuity to meet graduation requirements.*

Based on this SMART goal, the team created a weekly benchmark for each student to complete an additional 15% of the needed coursework each week, which would get each student to full completion within the eight-week period of the breakthrough team work.

### Innovating and Iterating

Guided by the DMGroup performance coach, the team brainstormed how they could engage these students to complete their coursework. To encourage engagement, they iterated among the following strategies, sometimes combining these strategies in a single week:

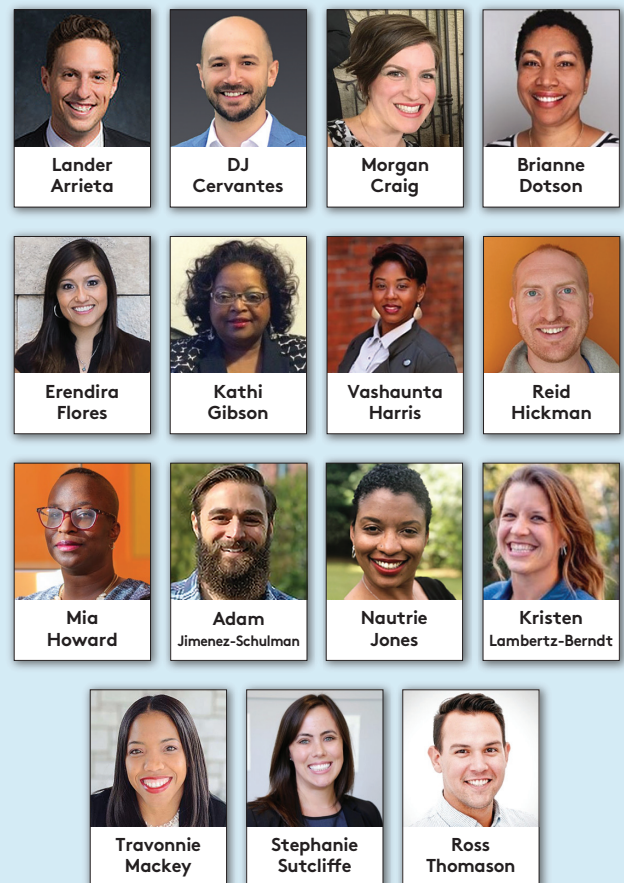
- 1. A Zoom virtual town hall meeting for parents/guardians of seniors missing graduation requirements:** the purpose of the town hall was to engage parents in helping to motivate these students to finish the necessary coursework to graduate. Staff followed up with individualized calls to parents/guardians and students to review exactly where the student was in meeting course requirements and what needed to be accomplished each week in order to graduate on time.
- 2. Zoom groups with individual counselors and content-area teachers:** Counselors discussed with students the barriers to completing their coursework: Was it due to a lack of routine? Were they not being held accountable? Did they not understand the content? Content-area teachers were on hand to support students and were available to teach and re-teach content so that the students could complete the coursework.
- 3. Socially distant home visits:** A teacher or counselor would go to a student's home and, from a safe distance, provide progress updates to the student and family.

## Performance Coaching Builds Capacity



Each DMBreakthroughTeam has a dedicated DMGroup performance coach to provide the support needed to achieve rapid results. In weekly meetings, performance coaches support teams in establishing SMART goals, brainstorming breakthrough ideas, analyzing weekly progress, and building teamwork and leadership skills. Performance coaches stand ready to provide just-in-time professional development and coaching to break through barriers, accelerate progress, and build capacity.

### DMBreakthroughTeam Performance Coaches





During the weekly meetings with the DMGroup performance coach, the team reviewed the results of the prior week, reflected on what was working and what was not, and developed a plan for the next week. Having a clear goal to work toward, the team was laser-focused and determined to achieve success.

## Achieving Results

At the end of the eight weeks, the team was successful in getting 74 of the 80 targeted students to graduate! Despite the concerns about engaging students during this period of distance learning and the projections of an 80% graduation rate (far below the prior year's rate of 92%), the team achieved a graduation rate of 95%, a 15 percentage point increase over the projected rate and exceeding the prior year's rate (*Exhibit 2*). "The BTT challenge enabled my school teams within my network of schools to remain focused on specific, identified problems by fostering their collective efficacy to make significant progress. The process helped them to deepen their capacity and gel as a team," commended Community of Schools Administrator Dr. Robert Whitman.



**Successful change programs begin with results.**

- Robert H. Schaffer

Co-author of *Rapid Results! How 100-Day Projects Build the Capacity for Large-Scale Change*

## CASE STUDY II



### Banning High School Breaks Through on Algebra 1 Achievement

Banning High School decided to use their breakthrough team to tackle Algebra 1 instruction. They assembled a team of six math teachers, most of whom were fairly new teachers with one to three years of experience and one a veteran math coach/math teacher at the school.

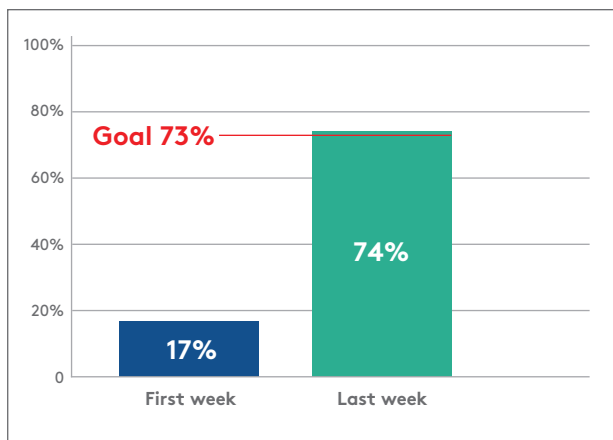
#### Setting a Performance Challenge Goal

Working together, the group was determined to see if they could make progress with Algebra 1 students during this period of online learning. On an assessment administered before the lockdown, the 266 Algebra 1 students who were tested posted an average score of 43%. The team was determined to help their students continue with the curriculum and perform better during the period of online learning.

When the breakthrough team began defining their performance challenge, classes had already been online for a couple of weeks. Within each section, each teacher identified about 10 to 12 students who were demonstrating some level of engagement and they decided to specifically track and target these students with the breakthrough team interventions; the total target group ended up being 59 students. The team set a SMART goal for the target group to raise their performance, expressed as follows:

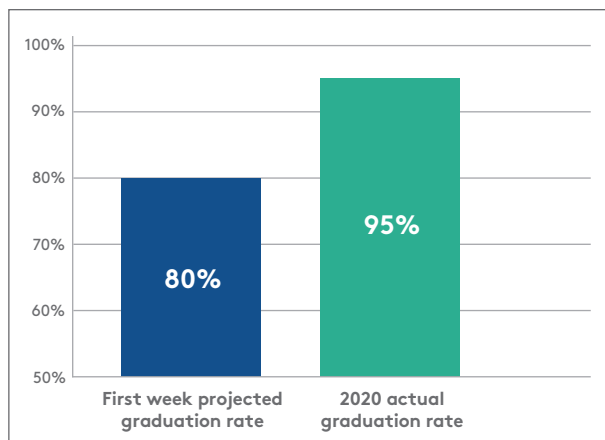
*Exhibit 2* FREMONT HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS TARGET-GROUP RESULTS

Students Meeting Graduation Requirements



Source: DMGroup analysis.

Improvement in Graduation Rate



## SMART GOAL

By June 12, 2020, 60% of Algebra 1 students (59 students) will improve their average score from 43% to 71% on the Linear Functions, Equations, and Inequalities CFA. On average, students will grow from answering six questions correctly to ten questions correctly.

With the help of their performance coach, the team set weekly targets that were aligned to the broader SMART goal. In setting these weekly targets, they took several components into consideration, such as their experience of how difficult each week's content had proven in past years, the degree of difficulty of the assessment, and the prior week's engagement and results.

## Innovating and Iterating

In the early stages of the challenge, the team worked to implement a flipped classroom model in which the teachers recorded themselves working through a problem and sent it to students in advance of the Zoom lesson. While they were proud of embracing this method of instruction, the team found they were struggling to meet their weekly goal.

The DMGroup performance coach helped the team dissect the data at a deeper level. Together they uncovered that when students took the assessment, they tended to perform quite well, but that there were students who were not taking the assessments and were getting zeroes. This finding pushed the team to pivot from focusing solely on instruction to focusing on both instruction and engagement.

The team achieved success in instruction by implementing individualized feedback for students who were underperforming. To raise engagement, they found success in using a combination of emails, texts, notes in Schoology, and private Zoom meetings to remind students to finish assignments and to take the assessments. They also discovered that they could increase the number of students who took the assessment by lengthening the amount of time the assessment was "open" on the platform. Finally, they played with the language they used about assessments — calling an assessment "homework," "a quiz," or "a test" produced different engagement outcomes, with "homework" being the most likely to produce high engagement levels. These engagement strategies seemed simple but were important to getting students to participate (*Exhibit 3*). Once they were

participating, students tended to perform well — a testament to the teaching abilities of the team.

While they iterated to improve engagement, teachers also tried different types of instruction. One teacher found success with a program called Delta Math that he purchased on his own, while others continued with their curriculum and continued to experiment with flipped classroom lessons.

## Performance Coaching and Just-in-time Professional Development

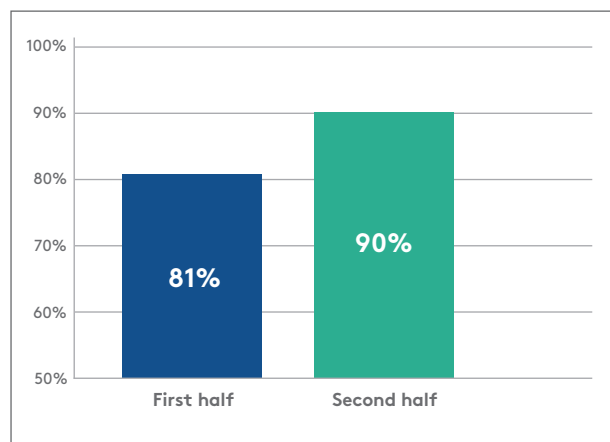
As described above, upon realizing that the team was not making desired progress toward their weekly goals, the DMGroup performance coach helped them understand how to analyze data and do a root cause analysis, which led them to realize that engagement needed to be addressed in addition to instruction. Throughout the DMBreakthroughTeam process, performance coaches provide such in-the-moment professional development. Participants report that this type of just-in-time training used to address real-life problems is much more meaningful and memorable than learning about the same problem-solving strategies in a professional development "sit-and-git" session.

## Achieving Results

At the end of the eight-week period, a final assessment was administered to the Algebra 1 students at Banning High School. The SMART goal was achieved, with the target group of 59 students scoring an average of 71%

**Exhibit 3 BANNING HIGH SCHOOL AVERAGE ENGAGEMENT**

(% of students participating in weekly assessments)



Source: DMGroup analysis.



*Working together — even though their meetings with each other and with their performance coaches were remote — helped the team feel connected and supported and provided energy and inspiration.*

on the test (*Exhibit 4*). All but two of the targeted students submitted the assessment, which made for 97% engagement.

In addition to achieving their performance objective, the team’s efforts translated into broader benefits. Seventy-two percent of the Algebra 1 students took the final assessment, a testament to the success of the teams’ engagement efforts; in other content areas, only around 33% of students took the final assessment, and 50% participation was considered very good. Even more impressive is that students outside the target group raised their scores, and fell just short of achieving the 71% target group average.

### The DMBreakthroughTeams Approach: Encouraging Focus, Creativity, and Skill Building

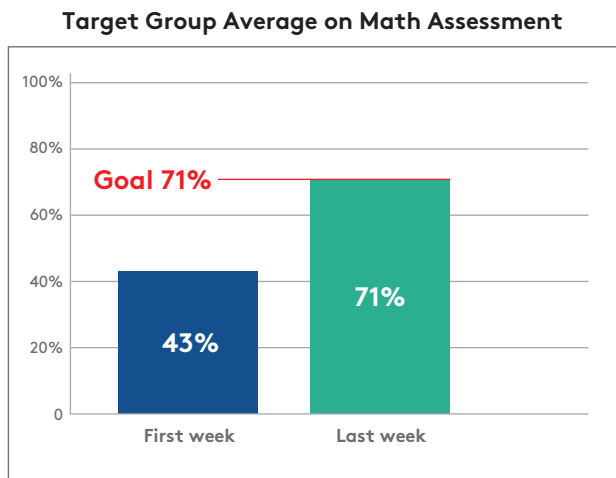
The DMBreakthroughTeams approach empowers teachers and staff to build capacity and encourages them to tap into their hidden reserves of knowledge and ideas to creatively

generate solutions, reach peak performance, and establish a new normal (*Exhibit 5*). Working together — even though their meetings with each other and with their performance coaches were remote — helped the team feel connected and supported and provided energy and inspiration.

When LAUSD announced in mid-July that fall instruction would be online, the teams that participated in the spring 2020 breakthrough teams felt better equipped to face the fall. Their example is providing encouragement to teachers and staff around them by showing that engaging students and promoting real learning is truly possible during distance learning. ♦

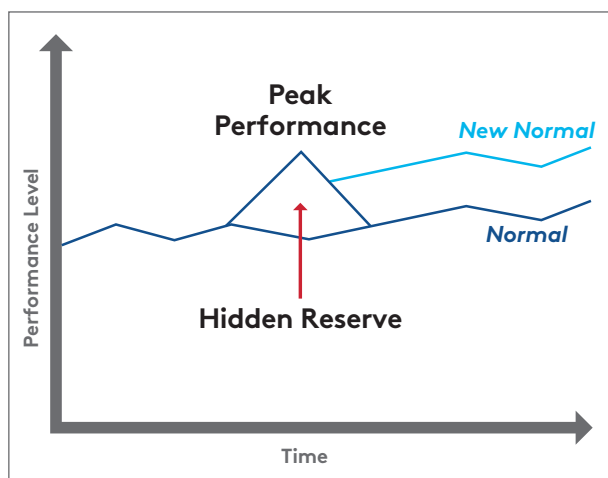
For a more in-depth look at the DMBreakthroughTeams approach, see “Unlocking Leadership Capacity: The Breakthrough Team Approach” in *District Management Journal 24* (Fall 2018).

*Exhibit 4* BANNING HIGH SCHOOL MATH PERFORMANCE



Source: DMGroup analysis.

*Exhibit 5* TAPPING INTO THE HIDDEN RESERVE



Source: *The Breakthrough Strategy*, by Robert H. Schaffer.