

Minnesota Principals Academy – Action Learning Project Suraya Driscoll

An Exponential Explosion of Growth and Change: East Grand Forks Public Schools Effort To Meet English Learners’ Needs

Abstract

This Action Learning Project was initiated as a result of two things. Minnesota has seen the number of English Learners (EL’s) increase 300% in 20 years. East Grand Forks has seen a 310% growth of our EL’s in six years. This explosion of growth included immigrants and refugees who are newcomers to the United States who have significant gaps in their education. This diversity has never been experienced in our community. The second reason this was initiated was staff has been asking for help on how they can help this population.

Vision: Every English Learner Career and College Ready.

The vision for this project was to use the continuous improvement cycle with a leadership team to increase research based instructional approaches with our EL teaching staff and the whole teaching staff. The leadership team will use a variety of types of data increase knowledge of the EL population we are serving to help our EL students become career and college ready.

Background/Context:

East Grand Forks Public School has experienced exponential growth of EL students over the last six years. We started with 30 EL students school year 2011-2012 and in school year 2016-2017 there are 123 EL students. There are 16 languages spoken in the district and our High School and Middle Schools have seen the most growth of EL students who are immigrants, refugees, new to country, and who have significant gaps in their education. Our level three EL students were leaving and level one students were moving in. In 2014-2015 we had a .67 EL teacher trying to serve all four schools as the EL population explosion occurred during this year. We had previously served 46 EL students in 2013-2014 then grew to 72 throughout 2014-2015. The teacher was overwhelmed and buildings were overwhelmed. There were limited ways to communicate with the new population explosion of Somali speaking students and families.

What we did: Create a leadership team involving the EL teachers to start building a strong vision with robust value statements. We wrote an EL plan that included how to

identify EL students, how to serve EL students, and how to measure growth of EL students the summer of 2015.

We added a teaching staff in 2015-2016 to serve the middle school and high school, and made the .67 teacher full time. Training for both these teachers included a two week summer institute with an EL specialist from the Center of Excellence. Curriculum was purchased. These teachers met weekly to ensure students were being given the W-APT and test results were shared with student support teams at the school and students were being placed in EL. In 2016-2017 we added another EL teacher and a bilingual Somali liaison. We invited the Center of Excellence to meet with our EL leadership team to rework our value statements and they were shared with staff.

What we found out:

We could not keep up with the growth and therefore had a hard time sticking to the plan. Each year the team was rebuilding the system of instruction as we uncovered more understanding of the new EL population. Growth was occurring faster than we could respond. The team became empowered to be innovative and try new things in their schools that they had never tried before because they had to meet the demands of the students. Staff development was needed for the leadership team to learn about best practices for serving EL students. We also found out that people not just in our community but nationally view this immigrant growth different today than in the past. Since September 11th scholars call this phenomenon “security escalation”. Instead of seeing immigration through a lens of reasonableness, we view it as a fundamental fear of terrorism that of our society will not be safe and secure if we let immigration from Muslim nations happen. We found we needed to open the door of communication/education not just with our immigrant families but also with the whole community.

Implications for Practice:

It is important for schools to understand that when in the midst of tremendous growth of a population to keep a team of people problem solving and asking questions. Capacity is needed to create innovations to meet the needs of the growth of the population. Standards, strategic thinking about how to reach our goals and an unrelenting focus on EL programming has been the key to getting us where we are today. As a team we haven't focused on fixing our program we have focused on redesigning it and making sure that the new system and processes are coherent and aligned.

Look at many types of data is important. Academic data, program data, implementation data, demographic data, and perception data are needed. It is critical to know what is occurring with each population of students served within district. Know that your foundation for programming will grow in development each year. You may see academic growth but you may not. Focusing on the mindset and culture of staff and students creates a pathway to progress towards academic growth eventually. Without this information we would not have seen the barriers of communication, misunderstanding of people and need to build bridges across the community.