

Minnesota Principal's Academy Action Learning Project
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The Impact of District Leadership on the Development of an Aligned System of Safety Nets through a Response to Intervention Framework

Abstract

This Action Learning Project studied the impact of district leadership on the implementation of an aligned system of safety nets, also known as Response to Intervention or a Multi-Tiered System of Support. Ensuring the existence of an aligned and effective K-12 system of safety nets is an important component of a standards-based instructional system and ensures all learners are provided with the appropriate amount of time, expertise, and support needed to attain college and career readiness. Because successful K-12 implementation relies on achieving the most effective balance between school and district leadership this study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What is the role of district leadership in the development of an effective system of interventions?
2. What is the most effective balance of leadership roles, capacity building, communication, and accountability between schools, and between district and schools, in the development of an effective system of interventions?
3. What are the specific non-negotiable actions that need to be taken by district and buildings leaders to ensure the development of an effective K-12 system of interventions?

A review of the literature revealed the district actions most likely to have a positive impact on student achievement to be: 1) ensuring instructional alignment and coherence, 2) focusing efforts and limiting initiatives, and 3) facilitating the development of principal efficacy. Strategies were implemented to ensure these elements were in place. In spring 2014 members of each building MTSS team, as part of the district MTSS team, collaboratively scored a building implementation self-assessment rubric in the areas of program components, infrastructure, culture, and funding/resources. Scoring their own building on the rubric and discussing areas of priority with the entire team provided opportunity for principals to reflect on the current status of RtI implementation in their building and set goals for the 2014 – 2015 school year. These data also provided a baseline to document progress in the years ahead. Using these rubrics specific needs and actionable next steps for each building were identified. In order to focus efforts and limit initiatives the decision was made to prioritize preparing the district to move to RtI as a special education qualification criteria in 3-5 years. Building MTSS teams structured under the district MTSS team were established, a data task force was assigned to develop local norms and determine decision-making rules for consistent tiered services identification. Goals in the area of instructional alignment included inventorying all intervention programming, determining fidelity and effectiveness, and filling curricular gaps. Additional reading specialists and special education staff were also assigned in grades 6 and 9.

Background/Context:

The district had implemented Response to Intervention for ten years with varying degrees of success. Implementation challenges included a lack of clarity regarding identification of students for various interventions, limited monitoring of student progress in interventions, limited resources in middle and high school, poor communication and students transition across buildings and the mismatch of attempting to 'do' RtI without being able to use it as a qualifying criterion for special education services.

Results:

The building self-assessment implementation rubrics indicated progress in most areas between spring 2014 and spring 2015. However, most scores stayed at the developing level. When asked to rate confidence in their leadership and knowledge of effective RtI/MTSS implementation the principal survey also revealed growth. This survey also confirmed principal expectations that the district provide training, support, structure, and resources for successful implementation.

Next Steps:

The building implementation rubrics scored in spring 2014 will serve as a starting point for building goal setting for 2015-2016 school year. It is also clear that the district needs to continue to evolve a local MTSS model and advance a shared understanding of the basic principles of effective intervention with all staff therefore, rather than send a few teachers and leaders to outside conferences a district MTSS institute in will be held August 2015 with all staff invited and compensated for attendance. In addition a district implementation handbook will be developed with specific details on implementation expectations, timelines, roles and responsibilities, and decision-making rules for each level.