

Minnesota Principals Academy – Action Learning Project
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Increasing Principals Capacity to Lead Literacy

ABSTRACT

This Action Learning Project used mixed methods to evaluate the implementation of a principal professional learning community focused on increasing principal's knowledge and confidence in leading literacy improvements in a moderate sized school district in greater Minnesota. This approach aligned the key role of the principal with the implementation of the districts teaching and learning framework with a focus on building the capacity of instructional leaders to support moving the framework from development into practice. As a district consistently performing below state average on state reading assessments, the principal literacy learning work was developed based on the district-wide need to address student achievement in the area of literacy. The project evaluated principals self-reported knowledge of sound literacy instruction; principal self-reported confidence in leading literacy instruction through facilitation or coaching; and whether principal actions and building approaches change as a result of principal engagement in a comprehensive administrative PLC focused on leading literacy.

The evaluation concluded that the collaborative learning work of the administrative team positively affected principals self-reported knowledgeable of sound literacy instruction and overall confidence in facilitating or coaching literacy improvements. Additionally, principals' perceptions of the implementation of sound literacy instruction shifted to reflect their deeper understanding.

Vision: Ensure all students learn at high levels with a focus on literacy as the gateway to all learning.

Background/Context: The Owatonna Public Schools is a district of approximately 5000 students served across ten school sites that serve early childhood through twelfth grade. Seven head principals, four assistant principals and an early childhood coordinator lead our schools. The demographics of the student body are as follows: 41% FRL; 23% students of color; 13.8% SPED; 9.5% ELL.

Why a change? Despite a district focus on re-establishing the foundation for curriculum, assessment and instruction, student achievement in the area of literacy continued to be an area of concern. District averages were significantly below state average and in the bottom half of comparison districts. In addition, the administrative team had a high number of administrators who were either relatively new to the district or to the principalship.

What we did: As a result of the review of the literature and the principal survey designed to identify strengths and needs in the area of supporting literacy improvements, a system to develop and implement principal literacy learning work. To provide this time, a portion of district bi-monthly administrative meetings were dedicated to collaborative learning work among the administrative team.

What we found:

1. As principals developed a deeper understanding of literacy research and instructional approaches their appraisal of the degree to which practices were being implemented in classrooms decreased.

These shifts indicate an increase in knowledge of literacy instruction and understanding of what high quality instruction looks like in the classroom.

Questions:	To What Degree is this evident in the classroom:							
	Not At ALL		Partially		Mostly		Fully	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Teachers understand the MN ELA standards and are implementing the instructional shifts to address the change in rigor.	1	0	5	8	4	3	0	0
Teachers regularly use a range of research based structures such as whole group, interactive read aloud, writing about reading and conferencing.	0	0	6	5	2	5	2	0
Teachers model (using think aloud) a variety of comprehension strategies for before, during and after reading.	0	0	5	6	4	5	1	0
Teachers teach students to use a variety of strategies for before, during and after reading to comprehend, interpret and evaluate text.	0	0	5	5	4	6	1	0
Teachers use effective strategies to scaffold learning and teach students how to access complex text.	0	0	6	8	4	3	0	0

2. Principal's confidence to facilitate or coach increased in the areas of literacy and instruction addressed through the principal collaborative learning work.

Questions:	How confident do you feel facilitating/coaching in this area:							
	Not At ALL		Partially		Mostly		Fully	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Teachers understand the MN ELA standards and are implementing the instructional shifts to address the change in rigor.	0	2	7	4	3	4	0	1
Teachers regularly use a range of research based structures such as whole group, interactive read aloud, writing about reading and conferencing.	0	1	6	3	3	6	1	1
Teachers model (using think aloud) a variety of comprehension strategies for before, during and after reading.	0	1	2	2	6	7	2	1
Teachers teach students to use a variety of strategies for before, during and after reading to comprehend, interpret and evaluate text.	0	1	5	3	3	6	2	1
Teachers use effective strategies to scaffold learning and teach students how to access complex text.	0	0	4	5	4	6	2	0

Pre Survey (n=10); Post Survey (n=11)

Implications for practice:

1. Professional development

- Principal learning needs around district initiatives were identified and addressed
- Cabinet meetings shifted from a focus on management tasks to a focus on learning
- Administrative interest in identifying and implementing professional development increased

2. Instruction

- Administrators developed a common foundation and shared understanding of high quality literacy instruction
- Principal capacity to appraise implementation of high quality instruction increased
- Principals developed more ownership for the teaching and learning framework