

**Minnesota Principal's Academy – Action Learning Project
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Instructional Coaches and Curriculum Support Teachers to Support 21st Century Skills in Literacy Curriculum

Abstract

This action learning project focused on implementing instructional coaches and curriculum support teachers at the elementary level with an emphasis on balanced literacy utilizing the district's 21st century framework for learning. The district's vision for personalized learning is "Our students are individuals, and we will encourage and support all students along their personalized learning pathways." The district's mission is "In partnership with students, family and community, Stillwater Area Public Schools will develop curious individuals who are active and engaged leaders in an ever-changing world by challenging all students as they travel along their personalized learning pathways." Two years ago, the district did not have curriculum maps, benchmark assessments, learning targets, essential learning outcomes or a strong focus on the standards as curriculum. The district also cut late start professional development days and many teachers were working in isolation. A staff survey showed a need for more communication between district departments and the classroom teachers. The survey also showed a need for differentiation training that would support personalized learning. A 21st century framework for learning was developed with the input of stakeholders, including staff, parents, students and community members. A new strategic plan was developed. Instructional coaches were hired to support instruction and embedded professional development and curriculum support teachers were identified and compensated to support curriculum.

While more data will need to be collected over time, preliminary results, including Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment results and Performance Series results, are showing the instructional coaches and curriculum support teachers are having a positive impact on student learning and growth. Anecdotal feedback shows teachers feel more supported, communication between district departments and teachers has improved and curriculum is now being updated in a "just in time" process.

Background/Context: There has been a lot of staff turnover within the district's Teaching and Learning Department during the past eight years. A lot of curriculum work had been completed during this time, but had not been inventoried or compiled for district-wide use. A strategic plan was developed two years ago and emphasized student learning and growth, as well as growing and developing staff. Differentiation and personalized learning were included in the strategic plan as part of the 21st century learning framework. The district has been working towards a balanced budget and has needed to be highly efficient and effective, while still making improvements and changes.

Why a change?

- Accountability for student learning
- Coaching is a best practice and is backed up by research
- Professional Development needed to be embedded during the school day
- Lack of high quality resources for teachers and a need for efficiency and effectiveness because of budget cuts
- Our world is changing and we need to change in order to best meet the needs of our students

What we did:

- Created a 21st century learning framework.
- Eight weeks of professional development for all instructional coaches.
- Cognitive Coaching completed by all instructional coaches and principals.
- Instructional coaches were at six of the nine elementary schools and worked with principals and Site Improvement Teams to develop embedded professional development, as well as individual teachers.
- Instructional coaches met monthly.
- Instructional coaches and curriculum support teachers represented all grade levels across the district
- Curriculum support teachers worked and communicated directly with the Teaching and Learning Department monthly to complete curriculum maps, benchmark assessments, learning targets and essential learning outcomes.
- Differentiation training provided by Diane Heacox and Richard Cash for instructional coaches and curriculum support teachers.
- Time for collaboration and reflection was provided for staff.
- All curriculum maps and other materials completed by the curriculum support teachers were posted on the district's website.

Instructional Coaches:

- Developed a district-wide practice of self-reflection and complex thinking as related to instructional best practice.
- Empowered, encouraged, and supported teachers to pursue individualized professional growth.
- Reached beyond classroom walls to help teachers create collaborative learning networks using 21st century tools and skills.
- Built strong, collaborative relationships and supportive work cultures.
- Increased use of research-based instructional practices.
- Increased practice of action research and engagement.
- Increased student achievement.

Curriculum Support Teachers:

- Collaborated with PLC teams to develop and refine a clear scope and sequence within grade levels, and to develop and refine an assessment system supportive of curriculum (Essential Learning Outcomes, Learning Targets, Common Quarterly Benchmark Assessments).
- Communicated within grade level/curricular area and across grade level/curricular areas to ensure a clear district-wide scope and sequence.
- Observed implementation of curriculum in classrooms across the district, looking for curriculum strengths and areas of need (curricular scope and sequence adherence to Common Core, assessments needs, materials needs, etc.).
- Communicated curriculum findings with Teaching and Learning, working together to prioritize and implement solutions to curriculum needs.
- Communicated with the district Curriculum Advisory Committee, PLC teams, grade level teachers and Teaching and Learning as needed.

What we found out:

- Collaboration and communication among staff has increased district-wide.
- Student growth has increased in classrooms that had support of instructional coaches.
- Standards are utilized as the curriculum and quarterly benchmark assessments assist and support instruction.
- Learning Targets and essential learning outcomes are being implemented 90 % to 100% at all elementary sites.
- Curriculum needs, such as 2:1 and leveled libraries, are being addressed in a timely manner.

Data:

| Grade | MCA Reading Proficiency | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|------|------|
| | 2014 | 2015 | Gain |
| 3 | 68% | 73% | 5% |
| 4 | 65% | 71% | 5% |
| 5 | 78% | 76% | -2% |
| 6 | 78% | 75% | -3% |
| MCA Reading Proficiency | | | |
| School - All Grades | 2014 | 2015 | Gain |
| School 1 | 73% | 68% | -5% |
| School 2 | 74% | 72% | -2% |
| School 3 | 71% | 71% | 1% |
| School 4 | 66% | 66% | 0% |
| School 5 | 86% | 90% | 4% |
| School 6 | 72% | 76% | 4% |
| School 7 | 78% | 81% | 4% |
| School 8 | 69% | 73% | 3% |
| School 9 | 78% | 80% | 2% |

Instructional Coaches – Measurables In order to monitor the effectiveness of our program, we will use three levels of measurement:

- **Quantitative Measures:** Longitudinal data from the Performance Series and MCA, and classroom data such as CBMs, district formative and summative assessments, and assessments included in our district testing protocol.
- **Qualitative Measures:** Pre- and post-coaching teacher inventories, staff surveys, and informal debriefs about the impact of the instructional coaching cycle.
- **Systemic Measure:** Our goal is to coach 50% of all teaching staff in sites with instructional coaches by the end of year one (100% of staff over 2 years). Each staff member will receive 10 weeks of coaching during the teacher’s assigned school year. Coaches with reduced coaching contracts or in multiple buildings will adjust their coaching goals accordingly.

Implications for practice:

- Continue to evolve and improve the role of the instructional coaches and curriculum support teachers.
- Collect more data regarding the impact of the model.
- Support and develop the model with the addition of Q-Comp during the upcoming school year.
- Provide a better understanding of and more resources for personalized learning.
- Follow-up with newly implemented Teacher Development and Evaluation Plan.
- Increase 21st century skills for adults and students.