

Minnesota Principals Academy – Action Learning Project
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Resolving Initiative Fatigue

Abstract

The goal of this action learning project was to reduce the number of school initiatives.

Vision:

The initial intention of this project was to reduce the number of initiatives overall, however, after consulting with the Instructional Leadership Team and Priority Leadership Team, it was evident that the staff believes the initiatives all have value and merit within the overall school program. Instead of reducing the number of initiatives for the building, we focused on reducing the number of initiatives that any one teacher was working on at a time.

Background / Context:

IJ Holton Intermediate School opened in 2013 as a STEAM-focused 5th and 6th grade Austin Public School. IJ Holton serves nearly 800 students and hosts approximately 60 teachers and 40 support staff. School demographics include 47% students of color, 59% students living in poverty, 17% students qualifying for special education service, and 9% students receiving support in learning English.

At the close of the first year, IJ Holton was labeled a Priority School by Minnesota Department of Education because of low student proficiency in math and reading as measured by the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments. During the school's second year, the Priority Leadership Team worked with the Regional Center for Excellence, an organization supporting school turn-around initiatives, to improve student achievement. At the end of that second year, the school applied for and was awarded the School Improvement Grant that would provide resources to help enhance the turn-around efforts at IJ Holton.

For the last two years, the Priority status and the School Improvement Grant brought forward a variety of initiatives that would help increase student achievement, but the result has been a taxing load for staff, eroding climate in a building with students that are already struggling to match gains of students across the state. It was evident that the staff needed relief.

What we did:

In the spring of 2016, shortly after I was selected to be the new Principal at IJ Holton, I spent time interviewing each of the staff members individually asking what they valued about IJ Holton, what they were most proud of at IJ Holton, what could be improved on at IJ Holton, and what they needed from me as the Principal. Responses varied, but the theme reflected initiative fatigue, a failing climate and a strong commitment to our students and staff. This input served as the foundation of our work for the 2016-2017 school year.

The Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) spent time reading *Get Better Faster* (Jossey-Bass, 2016) where we focused on different ways to leverage our instructional leaders in coaching teachers to mastery. We then addressed the initiative fatigue issue with our grant overseers at the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE). At the time, we had 7 active practice profiles. We requested that the state give us permission to maintain 3 profiles as "school-wide" initiatives (PLCs, School-

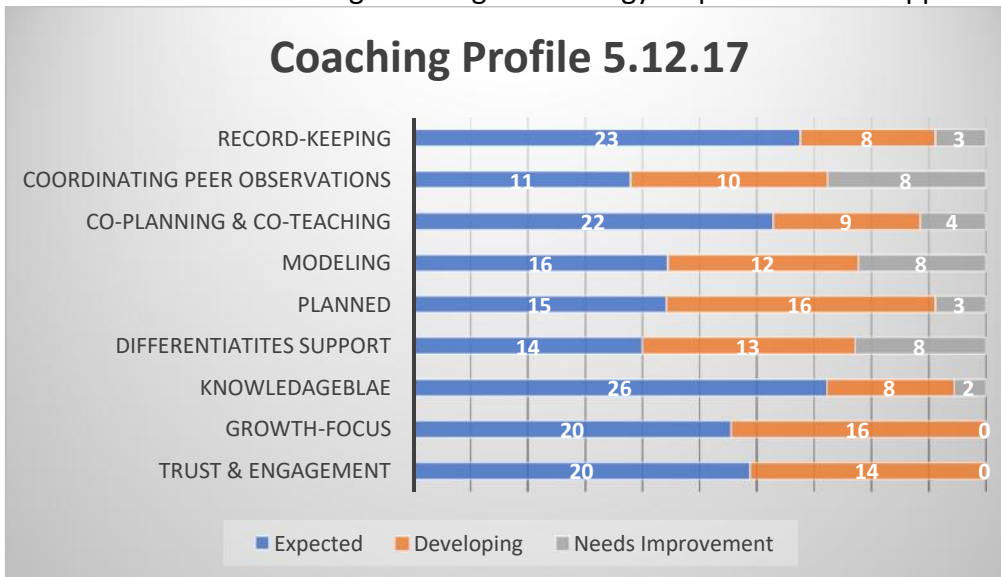
to-Home, and Student Organization) and allow teachers to self-select one of the other 4 profiles as an area of focus for the remainder of the year. Instructional coaches would then spend time observing and coaching that one strategy, meeting with teachers every other week. MDE supported this adjustment and teachers selected a singular focus from the remaining 4 profiles (think-write-pair-share, mathematical discourse, notetaking, and thinking maps). Our instructional leaders started by having teachers measure their present levels of performance using the practice profiles and then referred to those rubrics for coaching along the way. As an ILT, we generated a practice profile for the coaching model to help monitor our own progress.

What we found:

Teachers made significant gains in their focused instructional strategy through this model.

Instructional Strategy	Percent of Staff Proficient	
	November	May
Mathematical Discourse	0%	35%
Think-Write-Pair-Share	32%	73%
Notetaking	24%	49%
Thinking Maps	26%	52%

The differentiated coaching on a singular strategy helped staff feel supported.



Implications for practice:

The adjustments to the coaching model have supported an increase in teacher proficiency. We will move this direction with our technology coach in the coming year. Now that this coaching model is in place, we will work on a shortened timeline to generate the rapid cycles of improvement that are necessary to bring our students back to the state average. We will continue to reserve school-wide strategies for system level needs and support teachers in focusing on a single instructional strategy at a time.