

Minnesota Principals Academy - Action Learning Project
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REDEFINING THE SYSTEM

Abstract

This Action Learning Project evolved from three individual ALP projects that, upon reflection and realization that impactful change requires bigger thinking, grew into a system change plan that united our individual ALP work. Our work during Principal Academy pushed us to think broadly about systematic school improvement. This plan, creating a school-wide system of safety nets using a research-based intervention system, required changes in scheduling, staffing, and belief systems. Central to the vision is the idea that all students can read. This plan engages all staff - teachers, specialists, and paraprofessionals in supporting all students. Everyone in a school community has the responsibility to help students become a better reader. To accomplish this, leaders in the school had to have the capacity to lead change. Learning during the Principal Academy served as the building blocks for the Principals and Curriculum Coordinator to be able to evaluate the entire school-wide system and radically reconstruct a potentially high-performing school using best practices and research-based evidence.

Vision:

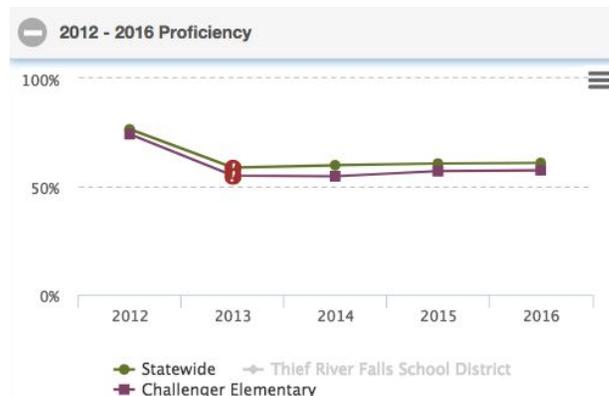
Our school's vision is to help everyone learn and succeed. To do this we will align science curriculum and assessment to a standards-based instructional system, create a 30-minute, K-5 reading intervention schedule, and build a system of safety nets for all students. In addition, by creating a new schedule we have set our school up for future grant opportunities without adding extra FTE's to Challenger Elementary School and increasing the district's budget.

Background/Context:

Challenger Elementary School is located in Northwest Minnesota. We have a 50-minute, two-day rotation for our prep time - (3)Music teachers and (3)Phy-ed teachers, except for Kindergarten which rotates every day for 25 minutes each. We use this time to cover prep for classroom teachers. During the last seventeen years at Challenger we made attempts to improve student achievement and improve teaching and learning. These attempts were doing little to improving our achievement, and too often, teachers spent the time on non-academic issues. We struggled with meeting the needs of students and lacking productive interaction with each other. We did not have the capacity to create and sustain a high-quality academic learning environment.

Program Rationale/Why change?:

Reading data was flat to little growth for the past four years. Science standards were not taught with fidelity across grade levels and pockets of students were missing science standards along the way. With some staff members leaving our district the



time was right to make a switch in our schedule to implement a reading intervention time as part of the master schedule and to have two teachers responsible for teaching the science standards K-5. We do not currently have an interventionist or intervention time. This change sets us up for additional opportunities down the road for grant opportunities such as ADSIS to add additional interventionists, counselors/social worker or instructional coaches.

What we did:

Everything was on the table for discussion because student achievement for all was the focus. It is now about improving the student's literacy and science experience at Challenger Elementary School. We created a new schedule that allows for science to be taught as a specialist. We went from a two-day rotation of music and phy-ed to music, phy-ed and science. We implemented a 30-minute intervention time for each grade level. All students (including above-level readers) will have a targeted intervention Monday-Thursday.

What we found out:

While change of this magnitude takes time to implement, a willingness to take on the challenges to improve a school system requires courageous conversations, time to reflect, trusting district leadership and substantial personal learning. The framework for this plan has been reviewed by all staff. Implementation will begin this fall. The success of this plan is not about keeping it exactly as we planned, but rather how we respond to challenges to keep it moving forward.

Implications for practice:

1. Principal and district team leadership is vital
 - a. Trust and relationships
 - b. Principal professional development
 - c. District administration professional development
 - d. Talk about your own learning and own the learning required to be successful
2. Make the case for "why"
 - a. Sense of urgency
 - b. Connect work to a common cause: student learning
 - c. All students can achieve high standards when all given the opportunity
3. Be reflective
 - a. Challenge your thinking of past practices
 - b. Define your beliefs and rethink your beliefs to grow
 - c. Allow multiple opportunities for feedback from involved stakeholders
 - d. Be transparent and take a risk
4. Focus on the system
 - a. Utilize your staff effectively
 - b. Maximize your schedule
 - c. Bring together all your programs: Special Education, Title I, EL, specialists
5. Focus on fidelity
 - a. Review research-based models and materials
 - b. Define your evaluation methods at the forefront; use your data