

# Minnesota Principals Academy - Action Learning Project

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## The Balanced Literacy Pilot;

We Are Writers. Therefore, We Are Readers.

### Abstract

During the 2016-2017 school year, a group of thirteen K-6 teachers participated in a Balanced Literacy pilot, with an emphasis on writing instruction. Our theory was that providing instructional best practices in writing and developing students as writers, would positively impact their reading achievement. We believe will not see the results we want in reading achievement unless we teach writing effectively. We were interested in exploring how the implementation of explicit writing instruction would impact reading achievement. This reform was based on a review of scholarly research and a collaboration of an interdisciplinary group of teachers and the principal. The approach required several days of professional development across the school year, instructional best practices in writing, rigorous writing instruction that is aligned to the common core, an emphasis on assessment and differentiated instruction and multiple observations. The project evaluated the perceptions of staff and student achievement measured by Formative Assessment Systems for Teachers (FAST) and the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) in reading.

The evaluation concluded that there were positive shifts in both staff perception regarding writing instruction and student achievement in reading. The students of the teachers involved in the pilot are showing benefit and outperforming their peers who were not in the pilot, specifically students of color. Finally, the changes in practice translated to positive growth in MCA data. We didn't see a big change in proficiency based on preliminary reading data but did see gains in grade to grade comparisons and cohort data. Due to our student cohort we needed to get higher gains in order to stay at the same proficiency.

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**Vision:** All students will meet or exceed benchmarks in reading.

**Background/Context:** Edgerton Elementary School is a traditional K-6 elementary school of roughly 500 students located in Maplewood, MN. The school serves a diverse student body: 71% FRP, 77% students of color, 9% special education and 35% ELL.

**Why a change:** During the 2015-2016 school year three teachers were piloting Writer's Workshop at Edgerton. In observing their classrooms along with other teachers at the same grade level, I noticed a significant difference in approach and impact. I also noticed in some classrooms we were not teaching writing consistently. By creating a larger pilot group we hoped to significantly reduce some of the barriers of our current writing instruction. Our current writing curriculum is Literacy By Design (K-4) and Write Source (5-6). Both curriculums were published before 2010, which is when the CCSS were

published. Therefore there were gaps in rigour between the standards and the curriculum, more so in Literacy By Design. This put some heavy lifting on teachers to try to fill those gaps. We also know that research demonstrates that writing improves reading skills and that reading improves writing skills. Writing is a vehicle for improving reading. (Graham and Hebert, 2010).

**What we did:** As a result of the review of the literature on how writing impacts reading, we developed the Balanced Literacy Pilot. Thirteen teachers participated in the pilot. We implemented Lucy Calkin's Writing Units of Study. The emphasis was not on *what* they were teaching but *how* they were teaching it. Teachers participating in the pilot shifted their delivery model to include a mini lesson, a gradual release of responsibility, conferring, student rubrics and interactive read alouds to support their instruction in reading and writing.

As an instructional leader I led the professional development for the teachers. The teachers learned the framework for a mini lesson and how to confer with writers. Teachers learned how give writing assessments and norm student writing using writing continuums. This writing data helped to drive the teachers writing instruction. I went into classrooms and modeled lessons for teachers. They used rubrics to look for the parts of a mini lesson and effective elements of writing instruction. Teachers observed each other teaching mini lessons and we went to other schools to observe writing instruction as well. Teachers also partnered up and co-taught conferring with students. Conferring includes teachers researching individual writers and then giving them feedback on what they control as a writer and what their next steps are for growth. Teachers were taught data collection systems to use this data to drive their instruction.

**What we found out:**

1. Teachers perceptions of the importance of explicitly teaching writing increased as evidenced by teacher pre and post surveys.
2. We saw gains in student achievement based on FAST and MCA reading data.

**Implications for practice:**

1. School leaders need to ensure their writing instruction includes;
  - a. Increased time spent on writing (a minimum of 30 minutes a day with 60 being the recommendation)
  - b. Writing for a variety of purpose, choice, a writing community, a gradual release model, writing strategies alignment to the Common Core State Standards, assessment and feedback.
2. Professional Development was essential in supporting teachers
  - a. Teachers learned about the correlation between writing achievement and reading achievement
  - b. Teacher support systems increased. Teachers spent a great deal more time being observed and observing.
  - c. Principal-teacher trust increased (as evidence by 5 Essentials) as a result of the principal working closely with this group of teachers

- d. Teachers requested that the professional development continued the following year and all thirteen participants agreed to meet every other month before school for one hour (no cost) to continue the learning of the cohort. We'll also be starting a second cohort next year with an additional seven teachers.
3. Differentiation and Assessment Increased
- a. Teachers substantially increased the time they spend in small group vs. whole group writing instruction
  - b. Rubric based assessments and student feedback increased
  - c. Teachers used rubrics to assess students writing and to drive student instruction
  - d. Teachers reported having stronger relationships with students as a result of conferring over their writing. Students often wrote about things that mattered to them and that were important in their life.