

Minnesota Principal Academy – Action Learning Project

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Strengthening Student Motivation – Moving from Dependence to Independence

Abstract

The purpose of this Action Learning Project, was to focus on increasing student academic motivation and perseverance of sixth grade students at Battle Creek Middle School, in the St. Paul Public School district. Additionally, the project had a specific focus to intentionally align the work with the school initiative of decreasing student's teacher dependency to allow for more independent thinking and learning. Our theory was that by providing educators and students training, research and resources that students will demonstrate greater academic proficiency and fewer behaviors, that could negatively impact the learning environment. Moreover, educators will feel empowered to incorporate character skills into their curriculum, in a more meaningful way that supports student's social, emotional and academic needs.

Over the past two years, Battle Creek has been working extensively with the Search Institute to research and implement their findings on student academic motivation and perseverance, Project REACH. At Battle Creek, the decision was made to focus primarily on the sixth grade students and staff, which consisted of administration, core teachers and special education teacher. During the first year of implementation, Battle Creek staff met with Executive Director-Kent Pekel and his staff on a monthly basis, with the primary objective of making the factors that influence academic motivation and perseverance clear to both students and educators. The REACH standards that were addressed are: Relationships, Effort, Aspirations, Cognition, and Heart. In addition to working with staff, a student survey was administered and used to guide the scope and sequence to meet the needs of both educators and students. During the second year, the survey was administered at the beginning and end of the year, to determine the impact of REACH over the course of the year.

The research and work implemented over the two-year period showed positive shifts in both student's perceptions of themselves and their abilities, and educators beliefs that small, intentional acts can have an impact on increasing student independence. One of the most significant findings was how educators implemented and integrated growth mindset and struggle strategies into their discipline, which provided autonomy and ownership. The sixth grade staff overall appreciated the process and want to continue and expand the research to the seventh grade staff and eventually to have school wide implementation and alignment.

Vision: to ensure that all students have the social and psychological skills that allow them to become independent thinkers and learners, through strengthening academic motivation and perseverance.

Background/Context: Battle Creek Middle School is a 6-8 school, serving nearly 740 students located in St. Paul, MN. The school has a diverse student body: 85% FRL, 40% Asian, 35% Black, 17% Hispanic, 9% White, 15% Special Education and 70% ELL. Battle Creek has been implementing standards-based grading for several years, 80% Assessments and 20% Daily Work. With a lower emphasis on homework, for grading purposes, many staff feel there has been a decline in student academic motivation over the last several years. The approximately 230 sixth grade students are separated amongst two teams. During the first year of implementation REACH lessons were able to be used to supplement the homeroom curriculum and had much alignment. During the second year, we had to be more strategic in identifying which lessons could be taught in various content areas and when.

What we did: During year-1 the BCMS sixth grade staff worked with Search Institute on a monthly basis, to receive instruction, engage in discussion and created lesson plans. Between sessions, educators taught Anchor Activities and utilized REACH Techniques to reinforce academic and behaviors, that contribute to student success and motivation. In the second year of implementation, staff took more control of lessons and made a stronger alignment of REACH process into their content classes. In addition, educators surveyed student participants and use data to inform decision making.

What we found out:

1. Kids loved activities where they got to talk about themselves (e.g. “Sparks” activity).
2. Teacher appreciated learning about student’s aspirations/values.
3. Teachers appreciated Search Institute for being flexible and utilizing feedback from staff.
4. REACH process provided a more structured way to implement character skills into their teaching.
5. “I think it’s hard to make connections with kids if you’re not authentic and you’re not vulnerable yourself.”
6. There needs to be a stronger, more intentional effort to strengthen connections and alignment of REACH concepts and everyday curriculum.

Implications for Practice:

1. Character skills are important and not explicitly taught at the secondary level “It reaffirmed for me the things that really matter, the things that make a difference for kids, the things that should be our priorities.”
2. New ways of thinking “It definitely did make me start thinking differently about things. Like, I teach math, so mistakes or whatever the mistake activity is, I know I was like, “Oh, I could really use that.”
3. Educators want to be treated as professionals and allowed the ability to modify lessons, curriculum, scope and sequence to fit the needs of their students.
4. Educators would like to survey their colleagues to examine teacher beliefs about students and teacher attitudes.
5. For any initiative implementation, educators need more time for interactive/experiential work in a collaborative work environment.