

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT (SIG) PRACTICE: CHANGING LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

EMERSON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

KANSAS CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS ♦ KANSAS CITY, KANSAS

After years of inconsistent instructional quality and low levels of student achievement, Emerson Elementary School (Emerson) was designated as one of the lowest performing schools in Kansas. The school's principal, hired in 2010, focused on making the case for broadening the role of instructional leadership among the staff and supporting the improvement of teachers' professional practice as key components of his plan to boost student academic performance.

THE STRATEGY: Making the Case for Change, Targeting Supports, and Monitoring to Improve Instruction

Emerson's principal focuses on improving the quality of instruction through job-embedded professional development for teachers. Key strategies include:

- Making the case for changing instructional strategies
- Focusing on a specific content area—first literacy and then mathematics
- Hiring a consultant to provide individualized coaching to teachers
- Establishing collaborative teacher-planning periods
- Providing frequent principal feedback

Making the Case for Change. Before implementing strategies to improve instruction, the principal meets with staff to examine student performance and identify ways that teachers' instruction can break the cycle of low performance among Emerson's students. The principal labels these meetings as "shining the light" discussions (because they are intended to ensure that all teachers clearly understand the school's starting point). During these conversations, the principal discusses trends in Emerson students' academic proficiency levels during the past five years and highlights performance gaps relative to students' districtwide and statewide peers. The principal notes the importance of impressing upon teachers that they are capable of improving the quality of teaching and student learning by making small changes to instructional practices and monitoring student performance.

Emerson Elementary School at a Glance

SIG Model: Turnaround

Start of SIG Implementation: 2010–11

Locale: City, Midsize

Grades: K–5

Enrollment: 195

Free or Reduced-Price Lunch: 94%

Racial/Ethnic Composition: 64% Hispanic, 25% Black, 8% White, 3% Other, 1% American Indian

English Learners: 47%

Students With Disabilities: 13%

Student Outcomes	2009–10	2010–11	2011–12
Reading % proficient	50%– 54%*	75%– 79%*	75%– 79%*
Math % proficient	70%– 74%*	85%– 89%*	80%– 84%*

Note: Percentages for English Learners and students with disabilities are from the Civil Rights Data Collection and may be based on a different total enrollment of students than the enrollment figure reported by the Common Core of Data.

* Because the school's number of test takers aggregates to 200 students or fewer, the proficiency rates are displayed as a range.

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Content-Area Focus. To support teachers in improving instructional quality, the principal elected to focus the school’s professional development activities on enhancing student literacy skills because prior student performance was especially low in this area. The principal chose to focus on professional development intensely in this one content area to increase the likelihood that teachers seeing improvements in student literacy performance would be further motivated to improve instruction in other content areas. To support this approach, the principal chose to use three professional development activities: (1) instructional coaching, (2) collaborative planning time, and (3) principal feedback.

Instructional Coaching. The school used SIG funds to contract with an instructional coach to work with each teacher during the first two years of the grant (90 on-site days in the first year and 45 on-site days in the second year). The coach began by observing each of the teachers in their classroom to gauge the teacher’s strengths and weaknesses in improving students’ literacy skills. Based on these observations, he worked with school staff during professional development sessions to identify appropriate instructional practices based on the specific literacy needs of Emerson students. He also provided training on the connections between language and reading development. Coaching activities included modeling instruction, sharing best practices, and co-teaching lessons. In addition, the coach conducted informal classroom observations, after which he provided feedback to the teacher and discussed areas for improvement.

Collaborative Planning Time. A key strategy for improving instruction at Emerson is regular peer engagement during collaborative planning times for teachers. Planning typically focuses on lessons occurring during the upcoming week to two weeks and includes regular monitoring of students’ progress, revising previously developed plans as necessary, and adjusting instructional strategies to support students’ needs.

Planning Meetings. Students are released early on Wednesdays, and the school uses this two-hour period for grade-level collaborative planning meetings. Each planning session typically focused on instruction for the upcoming week or two-week cycle. Discussion topics include (1) identifying the standards to cover in the coming two weeks, (2) developing materials needed to support instruction, and (3) planning rigorous instructional strategies to use in the classroom. Staff then work together to plan daily lessons by addressing a set of standard questions used for collaborative planning sessions, including the following:

- How do our materials match what we are supposed to be teaching? Do we need to purchase additional supplementary materials?
- Is the instruction going to reach our kids at a high enough level?
- Are we covering all of the lesson objectives?
- How are we going to assess that we taught the standards effectively?

After establishing the general instructional plan for the coming two weeks, teachers decide on strategies for extending and supporting student learning—both inside and outside of the classroom. For example, they discuss plans for homework assignments and parent support activities. Teachers also may discuss potential ways that other school staff can support academic instruction. For example, fine arts teachers rotate across the grade-level planning groups and identify where they can reinforce the content standards. An example of this type of collaboration is the first-grade teachers and the music teachers, who provide instruction in mathematical patterns such as $a-b$ (the binary form in music) or $a-b-b-a$ patterns.

At collaborative planning meetings, the principal asks teachers about their assumptions regarding instruction and student learning as well as their proposed instructional strategies. His goal is encouraging teachers to challenge themselves to improve their practice. The principal explained that these initial planning meetings also serve as brainstorming sessions in which he works with teachers to identify strategies and supports to help them achieve their instructional and student learning goals.

When the collaborative planning meetings first started, the principal made a point of attending each one. Now, he attends them less frequently. The principal emphasized that his early participation helped him to gain teachers' trust. He noted that such trust is critical to the school's improvement efforts because the expectation is that individual teachers will approach their instruction differently and must gain confidence in themselves to make needed changes in their practice.

Monitoring Progress. During the planning meetings, the grade-level teams also review the results of students' academic progress on off-the-shelf, online reading/language arts and mathematics assessments that teachers administer to their students on a monthly basis. Emerson staff use these assessment scores to determine whether students are making appropriate academic progress. They use the scores from fall assessments as the baseline for projecting the level of growth that students can be expected to make during the course of the school year.

Adapting Instruction. During the collaborative planning meetings, the teachers—often in collaboration with the principal and the school's lead teacher—focus on a second set of organizing questions to aid them in analyzing the student performance data and then make necessary adjustments to instructional strategies based on these data. The questions include:

- What patterns do teachers notice in the data (both across and within classrooms)?
- Are there any surprises or unexpected patterns of student performance?
- What topics or learning objectives need to be retaught to the whole class? To a subset of students?
- What strategies will teachers use to reteach the material?
- In which ways can the principal support teachers in making the instructional adjustments needed?

The answers to these questions launch teacher discussions about new ways to work with their students—such as through new grouping patterns or by working with other instructional staff (e.g., the English as a second language or special education teachers) to provide additional student support. Such discussions were among the principal's primary goals for these planning meetings.

Principal Feedback. In addition to meeting with teachers by grade level during their collaborative planning time, the principal meets with each teacher individually after new assessment data become available. During these individual 30-minute discussions, the principal reviews all classroom and student-level data with each teacher. He also works with the teacher to develop next steps for instruction. The principal emphasized that especially during the early years of the SIG grant, these discussions were not evaluative in nature. Instead, his focus was on gaining the teachers' trust to make changes and helping them understand that he was there to support them through those changes in any way possible. To provide ongoing support to teachers, the principal noted that he tries to spend several hours each day informally observing teachers. After completing such observations, he holds short 5- to 15-minute conversations with the observed teacher to provide verbal feedback that reflects on the lesson and to identify changes that the teacher might want to consider for the future.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

When beginning this effort, the principal needed help with supporting teachers through the instructional improvement process. The instructional coach provided this critical support through a variety of activities (e.g., modeling instruction, sharing best practices, and co-teaching lessons) . After approximately two years, the teachers' skills and understanding of the instructional improvement process improved so that less targeted and less frequent support was needed from the coach. For example, for approximately the first half of the SIG grant, the principal and lead teacher often organized the collaborative planning sessions. During the course of the planning meetings, however, teachers began to take the lead in guiding the discussions.

The principal noted that currently there is no designated leader for the planning sessions. Teachers have developed a shared understanding of the process and jointly lead the planning process. By focusing on developing the capacity of staff to independently and effectively plan for and adapt their instruction to address student needs, Emerson's improvement strategies continue on after SIG funding has ended. The school experienced relatively low levels of turnover among teachers (i.e., none of the 19 teachers left the school in 2012–13; two teachers left in 2013–14), and returning teachers explain the planning process to new teachers.

Developing a trusting relationship with teachers took time for the new principal. The school's focus on improving instructional quality, involving teachers in determining and leading the instructional strategies, and providing support created an environment in which teachers work together toward improving instruction. The focused instructional planning time helped to build trust between the principal and teachers alike.

CONCLUSION

Emerson Elementary School focused improvement efforts on improving the quality of instruction through coaching, collaborative planning, data monitoring, and regular feedback on instruction. These procedures enabled teachers to continually assess and improve the quality of instruction and identify effective strategies to support student learning.

SOURCES

Data for the tables on page 1 are from the following sources: School at-a-glance data are from the NCES Common Core of Data (2011–12); SIG school data are from an internal document within the U.S. Department of Education Office of State Support; students with disabilities and English Learner student percentage enrollment data are from the Civil Rights Data Collection (2011–12); and student outcomes data are from *EDFacts* (2009–10, 2010–11, 2011–12).