

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT (SIG) PRACTICES: ENSURING COMMITTED AND QUALIFIED STAFF

GREENUP COUNTY HIGH SCHOOL

GREENUP COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT ♦ GREENUP, KENTUCKY

At Greenup County High School (Greenup) in Greenup, Kentucky, more than 50 percent of the school's certified teachers left for other schools or retired prior to the start of the 2011–12 school year, the first year of implementation of the SIG transformation model.¹ Greenup's principal quickly replaced these teachers and also sought to address a bigger need in the school: increasing teacher engagement in the quality of instruction in the school. To create a schoolwide focus and vision, the principal set eight instructional priorities that permeate in-school activities:

1. Teachers help all students develop true understanding of the subject-matter content.
2. Teachers and students are prompt, prepared, and productive for the entire class period.
3. Lessons reflect the aligned curriculum with a clear learning target, written in student-friendly language.
4. Teachers use writing, open-ended questions, problem solving, prediction, estimation, and summarizing big ideas as integral parts of instruction.
5. Students appear to feel safe, respected, and encouraged toward higher levels of achievement.
6. Formative assessments are used appropriately to inform instruction. Students understand the scope and sequence of the expected learning.
7. Teachers implement strong classroom routines and procedures consistently and fairly, and students know and follow the procedures.
8. Teachers maintain appropriate pacing for student engagement, and questioning strategies are appropriate.

These eight priorities guide strategies for hiring and inducting new teachers, training current teachers, monitoring classroom instruction, and removing ineffective teachers.

Greenup County High School at a Glance

SIG Model: Transformation
Start of SIG Implementation: 2011–12
Locale: Suburb, Midsize
Grades: 9–12
Enrollment: 857
Free or Reduced-Price Lunch: 51%
Racial/Ethnic Composition: 98% White, 1% Black, 1% Hispanic, <1% American Indian, <1% Asian, <1% Other
English Learners: 0%
Students With Disabilities: 10%

Student Outcomes	2009–10	2010–11	2011–12
Reading % proficient	37%	55%–59%*	39%**
Math % proficient	29%	37%	35%–39%*
Graduation rate	***	***	***

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.

** Data are not comparable to prior year.

***Kentucky received a "timeline extension" from the U.S. Department of Education, pursuant to which it is not yet required to use an adjusted cohort graduation rate that meets the regulatory requirements. Accordingly, Kentucky did not report adjusted cohort graduation data for the 2009–10, 2010–11, or 2011–12 school years.

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THE STRATEGY: Improving Instructional Quality by Refining Hiring, Training, Monitoring, and Replacing Teachers

Greenup's principal implemented the instructional priorities to address a schoolwide need to improve the consistency of instructional practice. To accomplish this, the principal:

- Explained the school's expectations to potential new hires, and framed the induction of new teachers who had limited or no prior teaching experience.
- Provided administrators with benchmarks for monitoring classroom instruction and offering direct coaching support.
- Clarified the processes for replacing ineffective teachers.

Hiring and Inducting New Teachers. Greenup uses the instructional priorities to focus teacher hiring practices and the induction of new teachers.

Hiring Practices. Starting with the first screening interviews during the hiring process, Greenup aligns interview topics and questions with the instructional priorities. Candidate interviews last approximately 45 minutes and include two to three questions per specific topic area.² Although the interview protocol is flexible, permitting the principal to ask follow-up questions as necessary, the instructional priorities play a significant role in helping the principal judge the quality of applicant responses for each question during candidate interviews.

As an example, one of the interview questions asks about individualizing instruction as well as challenging and engaging both high- and low-achieving students within the same class. The principal noted that he listens for the following: language and descriptions of practices indicating that the teacher applicant can manage time effectively and use formative assessments to guide instructional adjustments; examples of what the teacher and students typically do during each part of the lesson (Greenup emphasizes active student involvement); acknowledgment of whether the lesson covers the entire class period (i.e., bell-to-bell instruction); and examples of formative assessments made during the class period (e.g., use of exit slips, in which students provide short, written feedback on their level of understanding in response to a prompt from the teacher). Because the school emphasizes hiring teachers who will establish and maintain positive interactions with both parents and students, the principal also asks about the reasons that a teacher applicant may have for contacting parents. Hiring new teachers whose practices align with the school's instructional priorities provides a necessary first step toward ensuring that the staff are committed to the goals of the school and are qualified to implement those goals.

Induction Practices. The principal uses the instructional priorities to establish expectations for newly hired teachers. These priorities serve as the basis for developing the ongoing professional development used to induct newly hired teachers to the school. In a half-day training session for new teachers during the summer, Greenup's leadership team (the principal, two assistant principals, and two instructional coaches) introduces new teachers to the instructional priorities. The principal gives descriptions, explanations, and examples of each of the eight priorities and emphasizes their importance in guiding all teaching. New teachers practice writing lesson plans that incorporate the priorities. Then the principal gives feedback on the plans and their alignment with the instructional priorities.

Throughout the school year, additional training is provided on specific instructional priorities. For example, for Priority 3 (clear learning targets for lessons), the leadership team provides new teachers with descriptions, examples, and templates for writing learning targets that students can easily understand. For Priority 8 (student engagement), a consultant trains new teachers on strategies to relate new lessons to students' experiences and encourages students to express themselves through regular class discussions.

Monitoring Classroom Instruction and Supporting Teachers. To monitor and support teachers, Greenup conducts classroom walk-throughs and provides one-on-one coaching. The leadership team received walk-through training

from the Kentucky Department of Education and the Greenup County School District on topics such as limiting bias, collecting and documenting evidence, and providing feedback.

Walk-Throughs. Leadership team members conduct 10- to 15-minute unannounced walk-throughs almost every day (an average of 10 walk-throughs per week), observing each of the 26 core subject-area teachers approximately once every three weeks.³ Classroom walk-throughs typically focus on the use of learning targets, assessment of student learning, instructional strategies, accuracy of instructional content, and classroom management. Classroom walk-throughs also enable the school principal to identify teachers who are excelling and provide them with additional opportunities to improve their practice, such as external professional development opportunities. Leadership team members document their observations and provide immediate written feedback to the teacher, either on paper or through e-mail. Feedback includes praise for effective practice, identification of areas in which changes may be necessary, and suggestions for improvement.⁴

The Greenup leadership team shares responsibility for conducting the classroom walk-throughs. One assistant principal observes all subjects in the school's ninth-grade academy, another assistant principal focuses primarily on social studies and science classes (grades 10–12), and the principal assesses mathematics and English classes (grades 10–12). The principal also makes informal classroom walk-throughs to assess instruction.

Coaching. Leadership team members meet weekly to discuss their classroom walk-through observations and determine coaching support to meet teacher needs that are identified in those walk-throughs. These discussions focus on adherence by teachers to the instructional priorities, areas in which individual teachers are excelling or need assistance, and potential improvement strategies. Although there are no predetermined criteria for deciding when a teacher needs individual coaching, the principal explained that a teacher who is not consistently addressing one of the instructional priorities or otherwise is engaging in ineffective instructional practices would receive additional one-on-one coaching support from the principal or assistant principal. During these weekly leadership team meetings, members discuss which leadership team member is best suited to provide this support, based on who has the best rapport with the teacher and whether the team member has observed the practice in question.

The principal calls these approximately 30-minute one-on-one coaching sessions “crucial conversations” between school administrators and teachers. During these sessions, the administrator focuses on areas in which the teacher needs additional support and suggests additional instructional or classroom management strategies. Later, the administrator conducts follow-up observations to determine whether the teacher has adopted the strategies and provides additional feedback as necessary.

Replacing Ineffective Non-Tenured Teachers. Greenup's principal also uses the instructional priorities to identify and remove ineffective teachers. The district's non-tenured teacher retention policy allows the principal to hire new teachers on a one-year contract⁵ that can be terminated if the teacher is provided notice of the termination prior to the end of the school year.⁶ If repeated classroom walk-throughs reveal that a non-tenured teacher's classroom practice does not reflect the instructional priorities, the principal provides the teacher with the written notification of termination. The terminated teacher may reapply for the position in the summer along with other applicants.

The principal can rehire a terminated teacher based on a self-determined plan of action. For example, the principal described a non-tenured teacher who was not meeting Greenup's instructional priorities during the 2011–12 school year. The teacher's school year evaluation identified areas for improvement, including managing the classroom more effectively and keeping students engaged throughout the instructional period. The principal reposted the position during the summer, and the teacher reapplied. In his interview with the principal, the teacher expressed his intention to use his evaluation results to incorporate the instructional priorities into his professional practice. The principal agreed to rehire him. The principal confirmed that the teacher now segments his instruction into smaller 10- to 15-

minute lessons to keep students engaged, revisits or “spirals” through content to build student mastery of mathematical concepts and skills, and manages his classroom more effectively than in the past.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Prior to receiving SIG funds, the leaders and staff at Greenup lacked a common understanding of the needs of students and expectations for instruction. A consistent focus on the instructional priorities and the use of frequent classroom observations has helped the leadership team communicate schoolwide expectations for teacher practice and student performance. In particular, classroom observations have supported the transition of new teachers to the school by giving them a common set of priorities on which to focus. Still, not all teachers can or want to meet Greenup’s instructional expectations, and some have resigned because of the high demands.

CONCLUSION

Greenup County High School’s eight instructional priorities provide a framework for the leadership team and classroom teachers to develop common and consistent practices aimed at supporting student achievement. The continued focus on these instructional priorities guides the use and evaluation of school practices. It also ensures that staff are committed to the students and school and are qualified to improve outcomes.

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).

IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

¹ Twenty-six of Greenup’s 44 certified teachers were hired after the school received SIG funds in 2011, and many were recent college graduates who were new to teaching.

² Interviews cover five broad areas of professional practice: (1) professional background, (2) relationships with students, (3) relationships with colleagues, (4) relationships with parents, and (5) knowledge of instructional strategies and techniques.

³ In addition to the walk-throughs conducted by the principal and assistant principals, Greenup also conducts formal teacher evaluations, as required by the state of Kentucky. State tenure law requires evaluation once every three years for tenured teachers. Because of the school’s status as a priority school, Greenup received a waiver that permits the principal to evaluate each teacher every year.

⁴ The principal described working with a teacher who frequently lectured and used slide presentations extensively during class periods. Although Greenup encourages the use of technology, the principal observed that students were not actively involved in the lessons. He worked with the teacher to identify two new instructional strategies that would reduce the time devoted to slides and provide more opportunities for student involvement. In subsequent classroom walk-throughs, the principal focused on the reduction of lecturing and the use of the new instructional strategies. The principal also recounted his observations of an English teacher who used instructional language that was more appropriate for college students than for ninth-graders. He worked with that teacher to incorporate strategies for regularly assessing students’ vocabulary and understanding throughout a lesson.

⁵ The process for removing tenured teacher is different. This process can take more than one year and must be documented through evaluations and principal’s documentation.

⁶ District policy requires that principals notify all non-tenured teachers before the end of the school year that their position may not be renewed for the upcoming school year.