SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT (SIG) PRACTICE:

JOB-EMBEDDED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

CRIM OPEN CAMPUS HIGH SCHOOL

ATLANTA PUBLIC SCHOOLS ♦ ATLANTA, GEORGIA

Crim Open Campus High School (Crim)[1] faced an ongoing struggle to engage students and improve students' educational outcomes. As an alternative school that serves the district's highest risk students who are 16 years of age or older, Crim has faced persistent challenges in raising student academic achievement and graduation rates. Two diagnostic reviews identified ineffective and inconsistent quality of instruction as a critical barrier to improving Crim students' outcomes.

In response, Crim began using job-embedded professional development to provide customized support to teachers. This strategy focuses on increasing teachers' exposure to and use of high-quality classroom instruction by identifying schoolwide improvement needs and targeting and tailoring teacher professional development toward meeting those needs.

THE STRATEGY: Aligning, Focusing, and Tailoring Job-Embedded Professional Development

Each school year, Crim conducts a needs assessment to determine the school's priorities for meeting the academic needs of its at-risk students and the instructional needs of its teachers. Then Crim identifies a specific instructional focus area for the year and uses job-embedded professional development to tailor support to teachers throughout that school year. According to the principal, aligning professional development with the school's improvement focus engages teachers in their role in improving the school and provides an opportunity for teachers to master specific instructional skills.

Crim's approach to job-embedded professional development relies on four activities:

- Defining an annual professional development focus area identified and informed by the needs assessment

Crim Open Campus High School at a Glance
SIG Model: Transformation
Start of SIG Implementation: 2010–11
Locale: City, Large
Grades: 9–12*
Enrollment: 441
Free or Reduced-Price Lunch: 88%
Racial/Ethnic Composition: 98% Black, 1% Hispanic, <1% White, <1% Other
English Learners: 1%
Students With Disabilities: 8%

Note: Crim also brings in 8th-grade students who have been retained, provides remediation, and places them in 9th-grade courses by second semester.

Student Outcomes	2009–10	2010–11	2011–12
Reading % proficient	50%–54%*	60%–64%*	45%–49%*
Math % proficient	20%–24%*	20%–24%***	≤10%***
Graduation rate	**	8%	4%

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.

 ** Four-year regulatory adjusted cohort graduation data were not reported by states prior to school year (SY) 2010–11; therefore, no graduation rate data are indicated for SY 2009–10.

 *** Data are not comparable to prior year.

- Providing teachers with common planning time
- Using instructional coaches to oversee professional development for all staff, small groups, and individual teachers
- Monitoring instructional practices routinely and adjusting professional development to target needs within the focus area

Annual Professional Development Focus Area. The annual needs assessment directly informs the professional development focus area for each school year. Crim leaders rely on and supplement analyses of the needs assessment with existing data collections (e.g., state reviews, teacher surveys) and newly collected data (e.g., external consultant reviews and classroom observations) to identify the school's improvement priorities and instructional needs. For example, Crim used its one-time state-mandated review, the Georgia Assessment of Performance on School Standards (GAPSS), and supplemented these findings with those of an external consultant group under contract with the district.[2] In subsequent years of SIG implementation, Crim leaders and coaches collected information by monitoring instructional strategies. They used these data to inform the choice of the next annual instructional area of focus. Crim contracted with the same consultant agency for additional reviews in subsequent years using SIG funding.

Focus areas change annually, based on needs, and build on the prior year's area of focus. For example, in the first year of SIG, Crim leaders chose rigor and engagement as the school's year-long improvement and professional development focus. In Year 2, Crim leaders focused on literacy and built on the rigor and engagement practices. In Year 3, the focus was on the use of data and technology to improve practices related to literacy.

Common Planning Time. Job-embedded professional development in the annual focus area is facilitated through common planning time. Common planning time is possible through a restructured school schedule and includes a consistent structure and set of expectations for teachers. The restructured school day includes an hour of common planning time every morning before school and an additional hour of planning time embedded in the school day for all teachers. Crim added this planning time by rearranging the school schedule, reducing the passing time between class periods, and adding 20 minutes to the school day.[3]

The morning common planning time follows the same schedule each week, and each day of the week has a specified format and expectations for staff:

- Monday—*All-Staff "Connections and Communications" Meeting.* Staff members share information about grade-level and departmental activities for the week. This meeting provides an opportunity for staff to make and strengthen connections.

- Tuesday—*All-Staff "Show and Tell" Meeting.* Staff members give large-group presentations related to instructional strategies that worked for them and/or lessons learned from out-of-school professional development sessions. Teachers volunteer to share strategies, or coaches can nominate a teacher to share a strategy.

- Wednesday and Thursday—*Small-Group Content and Collaborative Meetings.* Instructional coaches facilitate content-area group meetings to engage in content-specific work, such as discussing student progress, analyzing data, planning lessons, creating assessments, or clarifying content standards. For example, during one meeting, an instructional coach worked with language arts teachers to discuss language arts lesson plans, focus walks, and instructional strategies[4] as they apply to literacy.

- Friday—*Leadership and Committee Meetings.* The school leadership team (which includes the principal, vice principal, instructional coaches, support staff, and some teachers) and the department chairs meet to discuss administrative and instructional issues.[5]

Instructional coaches lead and participate in the common planning time[6] and are a key component of the tailored professional development for individual and groups of teachers.

Instructional Coaches and Professional Development. At Crim, instructional coaches oversee and guide all professional development offered to teachers, ranging from all-staff professional development to one-on-one sessions with individual teachers. Crim employs one instructional coach in each core content area: English language arts, social studies, mathematics, and science.[7] All teachers, including teachers of elective courses, are assigned to one of the four coaches.

In addition to their role in common planning time, coaches are responsible for obtaining feedback from teachers through logs; for rating and providing feedback on lesson plans; and for providing intensive, targeted coaching to individual teachers.

Teacher Collaborative Assessment Logs. Teachers are required to complete a weekly, internally developed Collaborative Assessment Log, in which they identify strategies that are working with respect to the instructional strategy focus area, challenges and concerns, and the teacher's next steps. These logs inform follow-up support from instructional coaches. This approach provides a weekly (at a minimum) opportunity for teachers to communicate with the coaches and request additional help. For example, one teacher noted that her challenges included "differentiated instruction" and "not enough time [to get everything done]." The teacher listed her next step as being observed by a coach. The coach observed the teacher, met with her, and recommended that she incorporate time for students to attend to writing assignments in an interactive notebook. This recommendation, in turn, allowed the teacher to focus time on individual or groups of students needing additional support.

Lesson Plan Review. Academic content-area teachers are required to submit weekly lesson plans to their coaches for review and rating. Teachers must submit their upcoming week's lesson plans to coaches by 4 p.m. each Thursday. Coaches provide a rating and additional feedback to each teacher and principal by e-mail by the following day (Friday). The coaches review and rate lesson plans across 10 instructional expectations adopted from an external vendor using a school-developed Lesson Plan Feedback Form. For example, coaches look for evidence that the lesson plan (1) clearly states the lesson objective, (2) integrates cooperative learning opportunities for students, (3) demonstrates opportunities for the teacher to provide feedback to students, and (4) engages students in the generation and testing of hypotheses. Coaches provide a rating based on a three-point scale and then summarize each lesson's strengths and areas for improvement. Then teachers make and post corrections to the upcoming week's lesson plans by the following Monday.[8] Coaches follow up with teachers during class time to monitor adjustments to the lessons in practice; they continue to monitor improvements in lesson planning during the course of the school year.

Targeted Coaching. Coaches provide targeted and tailored support to teachers with particular needs (e.g., classroom management, implementing a particular curriculum). Coaches have multiple sources for identifying group and individual teacher needs. First, they routinely work with teachers during the content-area group meetings and teachers can ask for support during these meetings. Second, coaches determine when teachers need targeted support based on their weekly responses to the teachers' Collaborative Assessment Log. Third, coaches determine teacher needs based on the weekly review and rating of the lesson plans of academic content-area teachers. Finally, coaches conduct observations to inform and tailor support to individual needs.

The targeted coaching is customized, and the professional development follows a cycle of identifying an individual's needs, developing a plan of action, modeling instructional strategies, co-teaching, and observing the teacher independently implementing the instructional strategy. A coach provided the following example to illustrate the process. One of the coach's teachers was having difficulty finding the time to adequately address Common Core State Standards during lessons because of challenges with classroom management—an issue noted by both the teacher's

evaluator and a member of the school leadership team. The coach assessed the situation, developed a plan of action, and partnered with another coach to complete a four-week co-teaching session. The two coaches determined that the teacher was specifically struggling with pacing, engaging students, and classroom management. For four weeks, the coaches "adopted" one of the teacher's class periods. Every day for those four weeks, one or both coaches went to the classroom and provided support—more intensive at first—and then they gradually reduced the support. Initially, the two coaches taught the class from beginning to end, acting as model teachers. After a week, they transitioned into co-teaching, planning and teaching together with the teacher. For the final week, the classroom teacher was responsible for teaching from the beginning to the end of the period. In the coaches' final visit, they observed that the teacher had improved her instruction in the one class period in which she received the support and also had transferred those skills to other class periods. In this work, the two coaches supported the teacher in need until she had "very few" management issues and more time for students to spend on learning activities, according to one of the coaches.

Monitoring and Continuous Improvement. In addition to monitoring by means of coaching activities, members of the school leadership team monitor teachers through walk-throughs and focus walks. Also, teachers conduct awareness walks in which they observe other teachers' classrooms. All these approaches help to support teachers in their instructional improvement. The leadership team uses these strategies to track the effectiveness of the school's professional development program, including the use of common planning time and instructional coaches. The monitoring relates to the school's year-long professional development focus area (e.g., rigor/engagement, literacy, and data and technology).

Walk-Throughs. Members of the school leadership team use walk-throughs to visit classes for two formal and four informal teacher evaluations each year. These evaluations are conducted with a rubric that includes components of instruction delineated by the Georgia Department of Education's Teacher Keys Effectiveness System. During formal walk-throughs, the leadership team members look for all components. During informal walk-throughs, they focus on a subset of these components. Teachers receive written, electronic feedback within five days of each visit. They have an opportunity to respond to this feedback by providing additional information to the walk-through reviewer; for instance, a teacher might attach an assessment that the students were taking during the walk-through.

Focus Walks. Focus walks, observations conducted by members of the school leadership team, are primarily focused on the implementation of a specific strategy or topic area and occur at least four times per year. Leadership team members look for particular instructional elements, especially those that align with the school's year-long focus, to assess how well teachers are implementing these elements and to determine which teachers are struggling. The school developed its own rubrics, tailoring them to the topic area of focus for that particular school year. During Year 2, for example, the walks focused on literacy strategies. Leadership team members observed classes using a rubric developed by the school that asked the following questions: (1) Is the essential question relevant and posted on the board? (2) Does the instructional framework incorporate literacy strategies gained through professional development? (3) Does the literacy instruction connect to content across the disciplines? (4) Do summaries occur at the end of the lesson? Each rubric also includes two pages of space for open-ended commentary, with prompts such as "What was the highlight of the lesson?" As needed, the team gives informal verbal feedback to individual teachers.

Awareness Walks. During awareness walks, teachers observe other teachers' classrooms during their preparation period or during other times at their convenience. Although all teachers participate in these observations, the number of awareness walks a teacher participates in during a school year depends on his or her individual needs. These walks are intended to prompt teachers to assess their own instructional strengths and weaknesses. Teachers use school-developed templates, tailored to the topic of the observation, during the awareness walks. For instance, teachers participated in an awareness walk focused on classroom readiness and observed classrooms using a rubric that asked teachers to assess the extent (using these ratings: *not evident*, *partially evident*, or *fully evident*) to which the lessons exhibited the following elements: (1) standards/objectives are posted and are accessible to students,

(2) the "word wall" shows up-to-date vocabulary, (3) rules and procedures are posted, and (4) lesson plans are available with framework delineated.

Continuous Improvement. Based on ongoing monitoring, school leaders make continued adjustments to professional development approaches in individual content areas as well as schoolwide focus areas. For instance, the literacy coach modified an approach to building student vocabulary when semester-end, post-test data indicated that students were not making the desired vocabulary gains. After reviewing the data as well as research about teaching vocabulary, the literacy team decided to adopt a different schoolwide initiative based on providing coaching to teachers. After Crim switched strategies, the results were positive. The average change between pre-tests and post-tests rose by approximately 30 percent.[9]

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Crim developed job-embedded professional development using SIG funding. Sustaining this strategy requires rethinking the way in which resources of time and funding are used. Plans to address sustainability include four strategies: (1) continuing common planning time, (2) leveraging federal Title I funding, (3) implementing blended learning, and (4) developing teacher leaders.

First, Crim adjusted the schedule to allow for common planning time and has been able to continue this strategy at no additional cost. Second, Crim supported four coaches during the SIG implementation years: two funded with the SIG grants and two funded by Title I. Crim plans to retain three coaches, all funded through Title I. Third, Crim plans to cut the cost of professional development by offering blended learning sessions—professional development that is a mix of online and in-person instruction, including sessions focused on the Common Core State Standards. Fourth, Crim plans to use experienced teachers to build the capacity of other teachers. For instance, three teachers were selected to assist a coach in leading a course focused on implementing instruction aligned with the Common Core State Standards. In selecting lead teachers, Crim looks for the following attributes: (1) proficiency in all the Georgia Teacher Keys Effectiveness System standards, (2) exemplary communication, and (3) commitment to professional development. At the end of the grant period, the instructional coaches developed the leadership capacity of these teacher leaders by allowing them to assume greater responsibility in driving school improvement efforts while also continuing to offer them support.

CONCLUSION

As an alternative school, Crim Open Campus High School supports the needs of its district's most at-risk students. The school is working to improve instruction so that students are engaged in their own learning. Each year, Crim identifies a focus area and then provides teachers with time and support to focus on this strategy. The job-embedded professional development allows teachers to work together on a common school priority and access support for their individual needs.

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 information is from SIG-Awarded Schools (2010–11, 2011–12, 2012–13) located at http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/index.html; 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 ED*Facts* (2009–10, 2010–11, 2011–12).

IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

[1] At the time of the interview, the school was called Crim High School. The current name is the Crim Open Campus High School.

[2] For the needs assessment during the first year of SIG implementation, Crim contracted with an external consultant to conduct a comprehensive review of the school's instructional practices. Crim selected the consultant based on its expertise in school rigor and relevance—areas of weakness that were highlighted in the GAPSS analysis. Initially, the consultant agency provided on-site training to core content-area teachers to build an understanding of teaching with rigor and relevance and determine how these principles can be applied to improve curriculum, instruction, and assessment. One month after that training, a team from the consultant agency visited 25 Crim classes. The team used its internal observation rubrics to gauge three areas: learner engagement, rigorous and relevant instruction, and literacy. For instance, the rubric for learner engagement included a Likert scale for rating the classrooms, with scores ranging from 1 (*low*) to 5 (*high*) on the following indicators: (1) *intensity*—positive body language, consistent focus, verbal participation, and exhibiting confidence and excitement; (2) *breadth*—the degree to which all students are engaged; and (3) *consistency*—consistency of engagement throughout the entire lesson. The consultant produced a report that included ratings in each of the three areas and ensuing recommendations.

[3] The restructured school day to accommodate common planning time did not require additional funds.

[4] Crim used the following instructional strategies, based on Robert Marzano's *What Works in Classroom Instruction* (ASCD, 2000): (1) identifying similarities and differences; (2) summarizing and note taking; (3) reinforcing effort and providing recognition; (4) homework and practice; (5) nonlinguistic representations; (6) cooperative learning; (7) setting objectives and providing feedback; (8) generating and testing hypotheses; and (9) cues, questions, and advance organizers.

[5] Staff who are not part of the Crim leadership team or department chairs may choose to meet independently, but they do not have a meeting requirement on Fridays.

[6] The instructional coaches meet weekly to plan the content of the morning common planning time meetings. They discuss, for instance, whether all teachers might benefit from sharing the professional development that some teachers receive at trainings outside of the school. If a session is best suited to small groups, they deliver the outside professional development during the Wednesday/Thursday content meetings. If a session is best suited to large groups, they present it during the "show and tell" time with all staff on Tuesday mornings.

[7] To select coaches, Crim used a two-level interview panel that looked for the following attributes: (1) strong knowledge base of the content area, Common Core State Standards, and research-based initiatives; (2) exemplary teaching skills, as evidenced by recommendations; (3) demonstrated leadership; (4) a personable demeanor, and 5) commitment to working to transform the school. Interviewers asked coaches to demonstrate their ability to facilitate a professional development session.

[8] For example, a coach reviewed the lesson plans from a teacher who included essential questions that did not connect to the rest of the lesson. According to the coach, an essential question is "a question that probes for a deeper meaning and sets the stage for further questioning" and also "fosters the development of critical thinking skills and problem solving." The teacher had asked "little questions about facts" rather than questions that prompted deeper thinking. To address the situation, the coach gave feedback each week about the function of essential questions, describing how to use them and giving examples. The coach explained that within two weeks, he observed that the rigor of the teacher's essential questions had increased, becoming "big-picture questions that required [deeper] thought."

[9] The effectiveness of the Crim literacy initiative was assessed through the pre-test/post-test method. A 20-question literacy test comprised of Tier II words (taken from Jim Burke's *English Companion*) was developed using the principles of the Gates-MacGinitie reading/vocabulary test. Each student completed a pre-test. After a four-week instructional activity of five minutes per class (increased learning time [ILT] initiative), the same students were administered the post-test. A dependent t test was run to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between both testing administrations (growth or decline), and Cohen's d was used to determine how much of the change in student scores was due to the ILT initiative.