

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT (SIG) PRACTICE: MAXIMIZING LEARNING TIME

CLINTON MIDDLE SCHOOL

TULSA PUBLIC SCHOOLS ♦ TULSA, OKLAHOMA

In 2009–10, approximately two-thirds of the students at Clinton Middle School (Clinton) were reading below grade level. In addition, Clinton teachers lacked the time to develop strategies that might help these students improve. Under SIG, Clinton extended the teachers' workday by one hour¹ to provide additional professional development activities focused on improving reading instruction for all teachers. The professional development for teachers is supported by school-based reading and mathematics coaches and three SIG-funded professional development consultants.

THE STRATEGY: Extending the Teacher Workday to Increase Time for Reading-Related Professional Development

Although student performance was poor in both mathematics and reading, Clinton's Instructional Leadership Team (ILT)—composed of the principal, assistant principal, a SIG transformation coach,² academic department chairs, grade-level chairs, two professional development consultants,³ and several teachers—focused on improving reading instruction based on the belief that strengthening students' reading skills would improve their performance in every academic content area. To create more time for teacher learning, Clinton also extended the teachers' contract day by one hour. This strategy provides opportunities for teachers to engage in professional development activities that are focused on improving reading instruction.⁴ The strategy includes:

- Individualized teacher coaching
- Content-area and grade-level professional learning communities
- Monitoring of teachers' implementation of new instructional strategies and professional development

Individualized Coaching. Clinton teachers receive individualized, classroom-based coaching support from the school's reading and mathematics coaches (who also serve as the reading and mathematics department heads) as well as from the SIG-funded professional development consultants. Collectively, these individuals coordinate and assign coaching services to teachers based on teacher needs (as defined by the principal during walk-throughs) and according to the coaches' areas of expertise (such as data-based decision making or incorporating technology into

Clinton Middle School at a Glance

SIG Model: Transformation
Start of SIG Implementation: 2010–11
Locale: City, Large
Grades: 6–8
Enrollment: 338
Free or Reduced-Price Lunch: 99%
Racial/Ethnic Composition: 39% White, 26% Black, 19% American Indian, 14% Hispanic, 3% Other
English Learners: 8%
Students With Disabilities: 22%

| Student Outcomes | 2009–10 | 2010–11 | 2011–12 |
|----------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| Reading % proficient | 35% | 48% | 47% |
| Math % proficient | 24% | 40% | 50% |

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.

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reading instruction). Coaching support includes classroom-based demonstrations and observations, as well as follow-up discussions and feedback. Coaches also help individual teachers analyze student achievement data and develop differentiated lesson plans to meet students' needs. For example, one coach worked with the seventh-grade science teacher to help her develop differentiated instructional techniques/methods that allow all students the capacity to create and share lab reports, regardless of varying reading comprehension levels.

Professional Learning Communities. To improve the consistency of professional practices within content areas and across grade levels, Clinton teachers participate in two types of professional learning communities (PLCs): content-area PLCs and grade-level PLCs. They meet by content area for 30 minutes two times a week (Tuesdays and Thursdays) before school and by grade level for 55 minutes three times a week (Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays)⁵ during the regular school day.⁶

Content-Area PLCs. Led by the academic department heads, teachers meet by content area before school to discuss curriculum, instructional strategies, and student performance on state and school-developed assessments. For example, the English language arts (ELA) PLC discusses best practices in preparing students for the school-based benchmark writing assessment by reviewing students' test scores, which are disaggregated by reading comprehension skills such as predicting, summarizing, and questioning. The mathematics PLC discusses how students can apply reading comprehension skills to solve math word problems, how to teach students effective note-taking techniques, and how to use writing prompts to assess students' math progress. After the content-area PLCs were in place, the principal and coaches observed improvements in teachers' instructional practices based on data collected during the principal's classroom monitoring sessions and the coaches' classroom observations.

Teachers in content-area PLCs discuss research on effective reading instruction across content areas. In addition, they study specific instructional and curricular techniques, experiment with these techniques in their classrooms, and then meet to share successes and challenges with their colleagues. For example, Clinton adopted a research-based program designed to help students master grade-appropriate academic vocabulary⁷ across the curriculum. For several months before implementing this program, Clinton staff gathered and analyzed research on the program and its prescribed instructional strategies. After teachers began implementing the instructional strategies in their classrooms, content-area PLCs met to focus on the elements of the program and discuss the successes and challenges they encounter. For example, during the PLC meeting, some teachers shared that student understanding and remembering of the target vocabulary improved when they drew pictures of the words and used the vocabulary in sentences. Subsequently, the other members of the PLC began to use this strategy.

Another strategy for sharing classroom practices is through the content-area PLC "focus walks," in which a group of one to three teachers visits a colleague's classroom to observe a new instructional technique. After these focus walks, the observing teachers and the teacher using the new instructional technique discuss the observations during their content-area PLC. The discussion focuses on the observed teacher's choice of instructional materials and strategies and the strategies they believe are engaging students.

Grade-Level PLCs. The grade-level PLCs provide a venue for teachers to discuss, in more depth, the curricular, instructional, or assessment issues raised in content-area PLCs and to identify the grade-specific implications of those issues. These PLC meetings are facilitated by grade-level team leaders, who are sometimes assisted by one of the professional development consultants. An administrator—either the principal or the SIG transformation coach—also attends each grade-level PLC.

Grade-level PLCs review grade-level data on state tests, math and ELA benchmark assessments, and students' classroom grades. Together, members of each grade-level PLC explore ways to improve students' reading fluency and comprehension skills, including such topics as:

- Using data to make “hot lists” of students in danger of scoring below proficient on the state math and ELA assessments
- Developing and implementing individual learning plans for math and ELA—which include a focus on reading topics similar to those that caused students to score below proficient on the state ELA assessment
- Using formative and summative math and ELA assessment data to inform instruction
- Using differentiated math and ELA instructional strategies in the classroom

Monitoring. To assess teacher efforts to implement new reading-focused instructional strategies, Clinton monitors classrooms and professional development activities.

Monitoring of Classrooms. Clinton’s principal conducts classroom walk-throughs daily to assess all teachers’ progress in implementing the reading-focused strategies discussed in individualized coaching sessions and during PLC meetings. During the walk-throughs, the principal also looks for different levels of understanding and implementation of the professional practices discussed in the PLCs and coaching sessions. For example, Clinton teachers are expected to post daily objectives on the classroom board, and the principal uses walk-throughs to tally the number of teachers who are posting the objectives as expected. The principal reports the walk-through results to the ILT. Coaches and department heads then use that information during PLC meetings and coaching sessions to help teachers better understand how to frame and post daily objectives.

Monitoring of Professional Development. The ILT also monitors the pace and focus of professional development activities in relation to changing teacher needs. Clinton hired a SIG consultant—an expert in whole-school change and teacher professional growth—to facilitate monthly, full-day ILT meetings. At each ILT meeting, the team discusses the professional development successes and challenges in the past month by using data from individual teacher coaching sessions, PLCs, and classroom walk-throughs. The group accelerates, slows, or maintains the pace of the professional development based on identified teacher needs.

Summer Professional Development Academy. Since 2011, all Clinton faculty, administrators, and consultants have participated in a five-day summer professional development academy. The academy, which the ILT begins planning a year in advance, focuses on reviewing the previous years’ test results as well as introducing professional development topics for the coming school year. For example, one summer academy provided professional development on ways to expand and strengthen students’ academic vocabulary.

The content-area and grade-level chairs, together with Clinton’s three professional development consultants, facilitate the academy workshops and breakout sessions. Summer academy topics include:

- Using data to inform instruction
- Differentiating instruction
- Implementing the Common Core State Standards
- Increasing instructional rigor and student engagement
- Developing and using performance-based tasks

Each day of the academy includes time for large- and small-group discussion as well as time for teacher reflection on the day’s activities. Clinton uses SIG funding to pay teachers their hourly rate to participate in the five-day academy.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Clinton's principal noted that improving instruction requires a significant investment of teacher time to be focused on a limited number of instructional strategies. Extending the teacher workday was an important strategy for increasing teachers' available time. However, the extended teacher workday also reduced teachers' availability to meet with parents after school. To solve this problem, the principal relaxed the grade-level team meeting requirements after the first year of implementation to permit teachers to spend one meeting time per week to meet with parents and students, as needed.

CONCLUSION

To improve students' reading proficiency in all subject areas, Clinton Middle School recognized that teachers need ongoing, job-embedded professional development. By adding an additional hour to their workday, Clinton provides teachers with regular opportunities to learn effective reading-related instructional strategies to improve student performance. According to teachers, this extra time led to changes in their efforts to continually improve instruction. Teacher survey results indicated that 86 percent of teachers in spring 2012 reported using higher-level questioning strategies, compared with 18 percent who reported doing so in fall 2011. In addition, 91 percent of teachers in spring 2012 reported using strategies to build students' academic vocabulary, compared with 9 percent who reported doing so in fall 2011.

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 Clinton teachers work one hour longer than other middle school teachers in the district. They start their contract day 30 minutes before and end 30 minutes after the regular school start and end times for middle school teachers in the district.

² The SIG transformation coach, appointed by the district, helped Clinton's principal manage the SIG budget and coordinate the work of the professional development consultants.

³ The two consultants facilitate the professional learning communities and provide individualized, classroom-based teacher coaching.

⁴ Clinton uses SIG funding to pay teachers their hourly rate for the additional daily work hour. In the first year of extended time, Clinton teachers had the option to transfer to another school. Only one teacher opted to transfer. According to the principal, teachers welcomed the extra time and pay.

⁵ On Wednesdays, however, teachers can use the time to meet with parents when necessary.

⁶ To provide time for grade-level teams to meet each day, Clinton structures the school schedule so that all students in one grade have exploratory (elective) classes during that period.

⁷ The academic vocabulary program, based on the research of Robert Marzano, helps teachers teach students grade-appropriate terms across 11 subject areas. The terms are extracted from nationally recognized academic standards documents, including the Common Core State Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards.