

# SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT (SIG) PRACTICE: TARGETING SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

ADAMS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

YAKIMA SCHOOL DISTRICT ♦ YAKIMA, WASHINGTON

Turning around a history of low performance at Adams Elementary School (Adams) required a close examination of the needs of English Learners (ELs), who compose more than half of the school's student population. To improve ELs' progress in learning English and attaining academic proficiency, Adams administrators introduced a three-pronged approach in 2010–11 that involved the following: (1) assessing teachers' strengths and needs in serving ELs; (2) establishing a special leadership committee to research, identify, and continually refine a set of schoolwide instructional strategies to meet ELs' needs; and (3) developing a system of monitoring, feedback, and targeted professional development to support teachers' use of these instructional strategies.

## THE STRATEGY: Identifying Instructional Strategies to Address EL Needs, and Providing Monitoring and Professional Development to Support Implementation

To address the needs of ELs, and students in general, the Adams leadership team:

- Conducts a schoolwide needs assessment through teacher surveys and classroom observations to assess the needs of Adams' EL students and the teachers' skills to meet those needs.
- Empowers an in-school leadership committee, known as the Oral Language Committee, to direct and continuously improve teachers' instructional strategies to meet the needs of EL students.
- Uses a combination of monitoring and targeted supports to address EL student and teacher needs through classroom walk-throughs, professional development, and grade-level collaborative planning meetings.

**Conducting a Schoolwide Needs Assessment.** To gather information about the instructional challenges and needs of Adams' EL students, the school's leadership team—consisting of the principal, assistant principal, and two instructional facilitators—surveyed teachers and conducted classroom observations.

*Teacher Survey.* Using information from informal conversations with teachers about their concerns with the school's instructional programs and supports for ELs, the leadership team developed and administered a teacher survey to determine:

### Adams Elementary School at a Glance

**SIG Model:** Transformation

**Start of SIG Implementation:** 2010–11

**Locale:** City, Small

**Grades:** PK–5

**Enrollment:** 686

**Free or Reduced-Price Lunch:** 94%

**Racial/Ethnic Composition:** 94% Hispanic, 4% White, 1% Black, 1% Other, <1% American Indian

**English Learners:** 58%

**Students With Disabilities:** 15%

Student Outcomes	2009–10	2010–11	2011–12
Reading % proficient	30%	41%	47%
Math % proficient	24%	46%	48%

*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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- Teachers' level of training in the school's two externally developed models for EL instruction
- Instructional strategies that teachers perceived to be most effective in promoting ELs' English language acquisition and academic proficiency

Survey results showed that nearly all Adams teachers had received training in EL instructional strategies (e.g., sheltered English immersion, curricular strategies) through district- and school-sponsored professional development. However, survey results indicated teachers believed that the instructional strategies used to serve ELs did not necessarily lead to improvements in the accessibility and acquisition of English in the classroom.

*Classroom Observations.* The survey results prompted school leaders to conduct an informal observation of each classroom to assess teachers' implementation of the two EL instructional models.<sup>1</sup> These observations showed that teachers' implementation of the models' key components often was inconsistent and not implemented with fidelity to the model.

Although the needs assessment showed existing EL expertise among some Adams teachers, it also uncovered a need for a clear set of schoolwide instructional strategies that teachers could implement to support ELs. However, the cost and time involved in training teachers to use such strategies were high, and a one-time training program could not meet the needs of an instructional staff with high rates of annual turnover and an EL program with numerous components that needed improvement.

**Oral Language Committee.** To guide and oversee implementation of EL-focused instructional strategies, the leadership team established an instructional leadership committee explicitly devoted to EL needs. This Oral Language Committee (OLC)—which includes the principal, teacher representatives at each grade level (kindergarten through grade 5), and instructional facilitators—makes schoolwide decisions about the instructional strategies that teachers use in their classrooms to support ELs.<sup>2</sup> Led by one of the school's instructional facilitators, the OLC meets every month<sup>3</sup> and focuses on (1) identifying, clarifying, and refining a set of instructional strategies to address ELs' academic and language learning needs; and (2) refining a classroom observation walk-through protocol to measure and enforce implementation of the strategies.

*Instructional Strategies.* Every year, the OLC reviews EL instructional programs and resources to identify a core set of instructional strategies on which to focus during the coming year. Each of the selected strategies must be:

- Easy to implement, observe, and document during walk-throughs
- Designed to improve student engagement and proficiency on state assessments—based on OLC members' professional judgment and knowledge of ELs' needs
- Viable for schoolwide implementation
- Able to set consistent expectations for teacher and student behavior throughout the school

To select strategies that meet these criteria, the OLC reviews research on English language acquisition to identify instructional practices with the potential to improve student outcomes.<sup>4</sup> Members draw on their professional judgment to determine which and how many of these practices teachers can effectively learn and implement at a time. For example, according to the principal, a key takeaway from the OLC's research review was that EL students need to frequently engage in oral (conversational) English with peers and adults, in both pairs and groups. Based on this takeaway, the OLC chose to focus on questioning strategies that encourage students to talk frequently during class, interact with academic content more thoughtfully, and answer questions with precision and poise. For instance, one questioning strategy involves pressing students to respond to a question even if they say "I don't know." Another strategy involves prompting students to elaborate on brief responses to questions to more fully explain their reasoning.<sup>5</sup>

*Classroom Observation Walk-Through Protocol.* The OLC developed a walk-through observation protocol that school leaders use to measure teachers' implementation of schoolwide instructional strategies.<sup>6</sup> The walk-through protocol, which includes a yes/no scale for documenting observation of a targeted instructional strategy, prompts observers to provide narrative descriptions of teacher and student behaviors related to that strategy. For example, the protocol requires observers to note whether teachers do the following: call on a variety of students, use sentence stems to scaffold discussions, help students provide complete and grammatically correct answers to questions, assign students to small groups, ensure that all students participate in discussions, and use questioning techniques that check for—and expand on—student understanding.

**Monitoring Implementation and Providing Targeted Supports.** The school's leadership team monitors teachers' use of the instructional strategies and targets teachers for support. To monitor implementation of the instructional strategies throughout the school, members of the leadership team conduct daily classroom walk-throughs using the protocol developed by the OLC and record the results of those walk-throughs using handheld wireless devices with specialized software. Each teacher receives a walk-through observation twice a week, on two separate days, for approximately five minutes at a time. Leadership team members may notify teachers prior to an observation or conduct an unannounced walk-through. Leadership team members may observe any class, rather than dividing responsibilities by grade level or content area among team members. The decision to share responsibility for all classes is purposeful; the leadership team members want to make sure they are aware of practices in classrooms throughout the school and ensure consistency in their feedback to teachers.

*Regular Feedback and Targeted Support.* The goal of the walk-throughs is for observers to share feedback with individual teachers after every observation, identify teacher needs, and target support. When a teacher fails to use the targeted instructional strategies in the classroom, the principal meets with the teacher to review observation data and provide specific guidance for practice. The principal monitors teacher performance and uses his judgment to identify which teachers would benefit most from additional assistance. During walk-throughs, for example, the principal observed that several teachers struggled to use sentence stems to structure class discussions. The principal shared this information with an instructional facilitator, who provided in-class coaching to teachers to improve their understanding of the strategy and increase their comfort in using it. Through this approach, school leaders act immediately to address teachers' needs and reduce uneven instruction across classrooms.

*Ongoing Support.* In addition to targeting individual teachers for support, the leadership team uses aggregate observation walk-through data to shape ongoing support strategies. Support is offered to teachers through (1) monthly schoolwide professional development and (2) collaborative planning time.

- *Monthly Professional Development.* The principal and instructional leaders use aggregated observation walk-through data to identify areas of focus for monthly schoolwide professional development. Instructional facilitators and OLC members lead these sessions, although some sessions may include an outside expert. The professional development varies depending on the information from the observation walk-throughs, but there are some common elements. First, the leadership team shares data and information about students' needs and areas for growth. Second, the leadership team discusses instructional areas for improvement. Third, teachers and leaders talk about how they can apply the strategy being discussed that month to address the needs of their particular students. Fourth, leaders expect that all teachers will implement the practice in their own classrooms and be prepared to discuss implementation and methods for improvement in the next professional development session.
- *Collaborative Planning Time.* SIG funding and a modification of union work rules allow teachers from each grade level to meet two times per week for approximately 40 minutes outside of the regular school day. Instructional facilitators direct and guide each meeting, which includes three or four grade-level teachers along with the principal or assistant principal.

Teachers use this planning time to discuss instructional practices and review their plans to improve instruction. The instructional facilitator relies on teacher data (e.g., walk-through observation data) and student assessment data (e.g., state assessments, district benchmark tests, and formal and informal classroom assessments) to direct the conversation and identify areas for improvement. In addition, the instructional facilitator leads teachers in collegial discussions of teacher practice using videotaped examples of instruction observed during classroom walk-throughs. Although designed as a professional development opportunity, analysis of faculty teaching videos also serves an accountability function, motivating teachers to improve implementation of schoolwide instructional strategies. All teachers in the school were videotaped during the 2010–11 school year; by the end of the year, walk-through data showed that every classroom teacher was implementing at least one of the instructional strategies on any given day.

## **CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED**

Initially, monitoring the implementation of instructional strategies through classroom walk-throughs was demanding on school leaders' time. During the first year, the walk-throughs required as much as three hours a day of administrators' time, but the frequency and duration of walk-throughs has declined over the years as EL instruction has improved. School leaders are nevertheless committed to ongoing review and assessment of an array of strategies to meet ELs' learning needs. They will not adopt prepackaged instructional programs because they believe this approach limits the flexibility that staff have to respond to the specific needs of ELs in their classrooms.

## **SUSTAINABILITY**

The OLC identified the school's core instructional strategies and instituted a culture of collaborative continuous improvement. District-level SIG funding also supported the school's adoption and continued use of classroom observation software and handheld wireless devices to facilitate the collection and analysis of classroom walk-through data. When SIG funding ended in June 2014, the district agreed to support one of the two 40-minute collaborative planning sessions each week; the other session was eliminated. According to the principal, the essential features of the school's strategy to support EL instruction have been seamlessly woven into the school's standard operating procedures and, with few exceptions, can be sustained beyond the SIG funding period.

## **CONCLUSION**

Adams Elementary School's multipronged strategy to support and improve EL instruction began by assessing teachers' needs and creating a representative school-based committee to make schoolwide decisions about the instructional strategies that teachers should use in their classrooms. Together, the principal and the committee identified the school's core instructional strategies, developed expectations for implementation of those strategies, and instituted a culture of collaborative continuous improvement within the school to better support the learning needs of its EL students.

## **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); and 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 *EDFacts* (2009–10, 2010–11, 2011–12).

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## IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

<sup>1</sup> The two models are Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) and Project GLAD (Guided Language Acquisition Design). SIOP is a national research-based model of sheltered instruction that helps students acquire academic knowledge as they develop English proficiency. Project GLAD is a national research-based professional development model that promotes English language acquisition, academic achievement, and cross-cultural skills.

<sup>2</sup> In the first year, the OLC also involved district-level staff—including the executive director for state and federal programs, the compliance officer for teaching and learning, and a representative from the regional educational service district (ESD)—to help shape the committee’s priorities and align the school’s EL instructional models with the district’s oral language plan and with state and federal guidelines. The ESD is one of the state’s educational intermediary units that offer school districts and schools technical assistance and support on a variety of issues, including meeting the needs of ELs. The regional ESD representative, for example, brought expertise in English language acquisition and instructional improvement as well as an outside perspective that was informed by lessons learned from working in varied school contexts.

<sup>3</sup> The monthly OLC meetings have a written agenda and minutes.

<sup>4</sup> Two OLC members were particularly involved in identifying research literature: the ESD representative with experience working with other districts on this topic and a teacher who was immersed in EL research as part of her effort to earn certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

<sup>5</sup> Beyond these instructional techniques, the OLC also renewed a commitment to strategies that the staff had used previously, such as sentence stems and graphic organizers for scaffolding and differentiating instruction. For instance, the OLC highlighted the think-pair-share strategy in which the teacher measures student understanding by intermittently asking students to think about a particular response, share that response with a partner, and collaboratively prepare to share the response with the class.

<sup>6</sup> Outside experts, including OLC members from the district and ESD, participated in four 2-hour meetings to develop the protocol, with the ESD representative creating the final form.