

The Reading Project

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Literacy: 57

Presentation

Overview

The Reading Project was developed to implement the use of balanced literacy instructional strategies in district elementary and secondary schools. It is one of the major literacy projects in our district. This program is a deliberate, long-term plan to increase teacher collaboration through the use of school-based reading coaches. Our focus is to effectively change teacher behaviour in order to increase reading comprehension and overall reading and writing ability of students.

Facets of a Complex System

In brief, this project began with identifying the most needy schools. Training in Reading 44 strategies was provided for school based literacy coaches. Support in the form of release time was provided to the school based coaches. Planning, monthly visits and reporting/reflecting meetings were organized and conducted by curriculum administrators.

We developed the project to model effective staff development practices

We were concerned that many initiatives were not being effectively implemented in the schools. We identified the following as the key elements for effective staff development:

- It needs to be connected or originate from a 'grass roots' level
- It needs to encourage true teacher collaboration
- Wherever possible it should be school based support

Barriers to effective staff development

We also identified some of the very good reasons why teachers are not willing to adopt what they perceive as new initiatives.

- "One shot deal" – teachers attend a workshop with little preparation or followup – they may apply some new practices in their classroom, but there is little long term effect
- "Top down" – district office initiates a change but teachers see the decision as external and do not make the connection with any personal changes in practice
- "Teaching to the converted" – occurs where teachers can choose to attend workshops if they are interested. The same teachers tend to attend all the workshops introducing instructional improvements and often go back to their schools to try and implement them. Their colleagues who are unwilling to implement changes in their classrooms stay at school, and do not express interest in the initiative. Unsupported, the small changes that the interested teachers make do not reach the culture level of the school and therefore lack long term impact.
- "Flavour of the month" – occurs when a school, or a district or a province has implemented too many new initiatives in an unsupported or non-strategic way. The teachers have seen new initiatives come and go, and have become somewhat cynical about ideas that may be adopted today, and then dropped tomorrow. When something new is introduced, they know that if they wait it out, it will most likely go away

Other issues or barriers to change can occur as a result of decentralization of resources. Our district is quite decentralized and schools make decisions regarding the dollars for release time for teacher professional development.

A further barrier is the lack of funding. However, we found that implementing this project was quite cost effective, starting small and allowing a groundswell of support to develop.

Details of project:

In our district there are two curriculum administrators. They and I analyzed FSA results (3 year averages) for Reading in order to identify the 10 schools with the largest percentages of students not meeting expectations. Schools were informed that they were one of the chosen and would be receiving release time for the project. (For once being last was a good thing) C & I administrators (2) met with principals to explain the parameters of the project and to assist them in identifying literacy coaches for their school. Coaches were provided with two days of instruction in the use of the Reading 44 instructional materials.

Principals and Literacy coaches met with Curriculum & Instruction administrators to develop a plan for implementing the strategies in each individual school. This was done as a group, so that schools could share ideas, but still develop their own plan to address the current needs in their school. This also stressed the importance of principals as instructional leaders, and supported them in developing their knowledge base about best practices in literacy instruction. The schools were then expected to submit a one page plan for approval. Each school was given a set amount of release days depending upon student enrollment, but had to come up with their own plan for how to use it. Curriculum Administrators then provided feedback and suggestions concerning the plans submitted.

Literacy coaches met monthly with Curriculum and Instruction administrators to review their plan, and to share strategies from school to school. Reference articles were distributed at each meeting and discussed. A foundation document used to guide the development of the project was Richard Allington's "What I've Learned about Effective Reading Instruction" Phi Delta Kappan June 2002. The curriculum administrators developed a rubric from this article that schools have used to assess where they are as a reading school.

In the second year 10 more coaches were trained and provided with release time. The program continued to provide some release time for the first year schools. In September 2005, we will enter the 3rd year of the project and train 10 more coaches. By September 2006 we hope to have all elementary schools with trained literacy coaches and schoolwide guided reading groups.

Other forms of support was provided by two elementary vice principals – one assisting schools in leveling texts and setting up their resources in a central area, one assisting them in using Running Records and doing a classroom reading assessment. Extra funding was provided to their schools and they were asked to commit 10 days to assisting other schools. We have now trained some of the previous reading coaches to take over as both vice-principals have more challenging assignments next year.

Connection to other projects

French Immersion/Core French – projects aimed at increasing the use of the Reading 44 materials in French immersion and core French classrooms.

Shared Reading – a project focused on the use of aboriginal titles to provide literacy experience with Reading 44 strategies (Gail Stromquist, Langley)

Early Family Literacy – a joint project with the Northern Health Unit, and Prince George Public Library to provide pre-kindergarten reading experiences for 3-5 year olds and their parents.

Primary Project – a pilot project to improve student achievement in inner city schools by reducing class size and providing focused instructional support particularly for reading strategies. (modeled on the Achieving a Necessary Future, Central Okanagan)

Results of project

Early results show an increase in student achievement. We are tracking the Foundation Skills Assessment results, Curriculum Based Measurement Reading results, and Kindergarten screening.

However, the Reading Project is the umbrella project for a number of other initiatives within our district and therefore the effect of this individual project is difficult to track. Included is a chart of various results using Curriculum Based Measurement, Grade 3 results, for schools that were in the Reading Project and schools that are not yet included.

Qualitative results reported both in conversation and by literacy coaches reports:

Increased use of assessment to inform instruction:

- More elementary schools focused on integrating quality assessment into classroom practice: (rather than assessment being seen as the role of the Learning Assistance Teacher).
- Increased buy in to the use of Kindergarten Screening tools – Many teachers are willing to use them 3 times a year, and report that they have provided more interventions for students as a result of the screening information.
- More ongoing monitoring of reading progress – most schools administering “Curriculum Based Measurement – Reading” 3 times per year.
- “Classroom Assessment: Reading for Information” used more widely in elementary schools.
- School-wide assessments using DRA and Running Records occurring in a number of schools to place all students in guided reading groups.

Increased level of interest in the project exhibited by schools:

- Schools asking when they can get on board and be a ‘Reading Project’ school.
- Schools with ample release time, voluntarily joining in the training, and implementing literacy coaches in their schools.
- School-wide reading groups in some of the 2nd year schools, some that we would not have predicted would be able to adopt this with present staff.
- Between school visits to see leveled text, to observe whole school guided reading, to look at how a classroom can be set up to focus on literacy.
- Many schools having collaborative discussions with primary and intermediate teachers about how to set up a system for centrally storing and circulating the leveled text materials.
- Reading coaches presenting to PAC’s.
- Literacy leadership teams developing in schools.
- Teaching assistants involved in guided reading groups with teachers.
- Summer project proposed by school staff to translate the Classroom Reading for Information Assessment into French.

Anecdotal Comments from literacy coaches' reports.

"Being included in the Reading Project allowed us to focus our attention to laying plans/goals for literacy within the school." Shady Valley Year 1

"We have learned that working with peers can be challenging" Malaspina Year 1

"There is a significant increase in professional discussions regarding reading amongst staff members; periodical articles, strategy sharing, sharing experiences about student results, etc." Peden Hill Year 1

"I finally get to have one on one time with higher end students" Ron Brent (schoolwide guided reading groups) Year 2

"The release days have affected the way I look at approaching guided reading" Harwin, Year 2

Tool time women – At one school where assessment is seen as the domain of the learning assistance teacher, yet a great deal of complaint is made about lack of learning assistance time, the literacy coaches felt that they needed to be creative. They presented "Tool-time Women" at a staff meeting, emphasizing the use of the word 'tool' rather than 'assessment' while still getting the message across that teachers should be using the 'tool'. This is an example of how teachers collaborating together can break down the barriers to effective improvement initiatives.

Donna's Dilemma – The Curriculum Administrator came to say how worried she was about one of the schools. The literacy coach had met with her and was very upset because she had one teacher who was unwilling to participate in the project. The coach was worried that this teacher would continue to refuse to implement guided reading groups in her classroom. "But what a success," I said, "It's not me or you worrying about the teacher's buy in, it's not the school principal, it's the colleague that teaches in the next classroom". And sure enough, as schools build up the critical mass of support and teacher buy in, the reluctant teachers are comfortable slowly getting involved.

Downside

- One or two principals were startled to be one of the 'chosen' schools.
- It is difficult for the curriculum administrators to find the time to make monthly visits – after school and before school, particularly with Mackenzie, McBride and Valemount.
- We cannot include more than ten new schools because the curriculum administrators can only provide support for about ten at a time, and we want to make sure we support them well.
- Tracking the use of release time to support the project has been time consuming.
- Not all schools are receiving service; some still expect equity of support services regardless of the population of the school.

Conclusion

The power of this project is the development of a sustainable structure to promote staff development at the school level. The plan has been carefully crafted to be sustainable, and bring the project, from a strategy for implementing change into a best practice that all schools follow.

The literacy coaches are teachers in the school, and the staff meets to decide how to implement the strategies. The impetus for change is providing release time, and encouraging peer coaching. It is helping us to find the balance between pressure and support to move the student improvement agenda forward.

Questions

1. Do projects/initiatives in your district have sustainability built in to the planning, or do your teachers view them as ‘one-shot deals,’ or ‘flavour of the month’?
2. How do you know that projects that you implement have changed what is happening in the classroom when the door gets shut?
3. How do you reach the reluctant teachers, if you only provide workshops for those who choose to come? Are you preaching to the converted?
4. What models do you use in your district to promote teacher collaboration?

Sample School Plan Quinson

Sample School Plan Shady Valley

Rubric for Assessing Reading Schools progress.

Are we creating schools in which every year every teacher becomes more expert?

	Exceeds Expectations	Fully Meeting	Minimally Meeting	Not Yet Meeting
Time	Students reading and writing half the day.	Students reading and writing 90 minutes per day.	Students reading and writing 45 minutes per day.	Students spend less than 20 minutes per day reading and writing.
Texts	Rich supply of books and lowest achievers reading books they can actually read. High achievers read lots of easy books they can read fluently and comprehend.	Students use multileveled, multi-sourced curricula that meet the diverse needs of students. (Leveled texts, guided reading groups)	Students all use same textbooks and worksheets most of the time. Low achievers participate in a guided reading group twice a week.	Students all using the same textbooks and do the same worksheets. Low achievers spending 80% of time in books that are too difficult.
Teaching	Teachers give direct and explicit demonstrations of reading strategies. Teachers model what good readers do.	Teachers model different reading strategies to accommodate the different learning styles of their students.	Teachers give out assignments with little direction.	Teachers give out assignments and assess without actual teaching.
Talk	Teachers foster much more student talk across the school day.	Teachers and students discuss ideas, concepts, hypotheses, etc. Teachers pose more open-ended questions.	Teachers pose questions, children respond, teachers verify or correct answers	Teachers discourage all kinds of talk. Teacher talk is scripted.
Tasks	Teachers give longer tasks that integrate several content areas. Work is challenging and requires more self-regulation. Students given choices.	Students seem engaged and are less often off task.	Teachers assign Low-level worksheet type tasks.	Teachers assign multiple shorter tasks. Low-level worksheet type tasks given: also, one size fits all model of instruction.
Testing	Teachers evaluate student work and grades based on effort and improvement. Teachers use rubric-based evaluation to assign grades. Students know criteria upfront.	Teachers evaluate student work and grades based on effort and improvement	Teachers use mostly achievement-based grading-without considering student effort and improvement.	Teachers use achievement-based grading (best performances get the best grades).

Allington. R. "What I've learned about effective reading instruction: From a decade of studying exemplary elementary classroom teachers." Phi Delta Kappan. June 2002, pages 740-747.