

READING, WRITING, AND REFORM

MISSOURI DISTRICT USES
TITLE II-A FUNDS TO IMPROVE
LITERACY INSTRUCTION

BY CHAD SUTTON

In fall 2012, my colleagues and I in Missouri's North Kansas City Schools knew something had to change in our approach to teaching the most important academic skills: reading and writing.

Missouri would soon adopt the Common Core State Standards and expect students to engage in higher-order thinking that requires strong literacy skills. But student performance on state assessments in English language arts had been below the state average for several years for all groups of students, and even more for free and reduced lunch and English learners, reflecting a troubling achievement gap.

At the same time, student needs continued to grow. Among our population of about 20,000 students, the poverty rate approaches 50% and the mobility rate 37%.

We recognized that a major contributing factor in our students' struggles with literacy was the inconsistency of our instructional approaches at the elementary level. Each of the 21 elementary schools allocated a different amount of time



IDEAS

to reading and writing instruction. In many cases, the time allocation and instructional approach varied by grade level within the same building.

Across the district, 3rd grade was the only grade level that consistently allocated a 50- to 60-minute daily block of writing because the 3rd grade state assessment included a writing prompt for which students needed to be prepared.

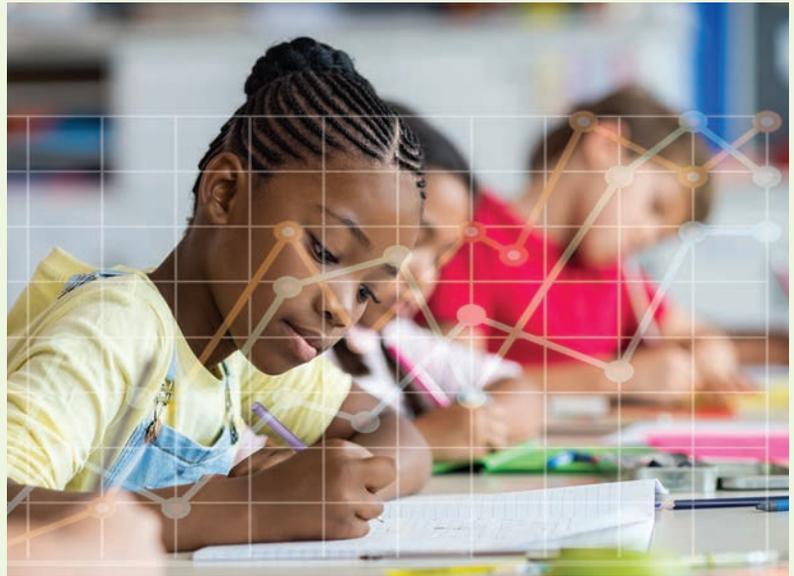
Turning this situation around would require an overhaul of our approach and, at its heart, professional learning and capacity building for teachers to work differently and more consistently. The variation of pedagogical approaches throughout the district had historically caused many challenges with professional learning and teacher collaboration. With so many different instructional methods, it was difficult for teachers and principals to identify commonalities across or even within schools when discussing Tier 1 literacy instruction.

With the crucial support of federal Title II-A funds, our district created a coherent approach that changed literacy instruction in North Kansas City and, more importantly, improved students' reading skills and performance.

Our process over the last seven years demonstrates that changing entrenched patterns is possible with the will and the resources — financial, human, and otherwise — to focus on improving instructional practices.

ACTION RESEARCH TEACHER TEAMS

Our first step was to establish a districtwide K-5 literacy task force that included K-5 teachers representing all grade levels and programs, building principals, instructional coaches, teacher union representatives, and central office leaders. The goal was to develop a research-based systemic approach to reading and writing that all 21 elementary schools would implement.



LESSONS LEARNED

Seven years in, North Kansas City Schools is working to expand its professional learning model from an elementary to pre-K-12 model.

During this time, we've learned several lessons about developing school improvement systems and the importance of alignment. These are things we have found to be essential:

- **Student-centered decisions:** Instead of making decisions about programs based on personal preferences, we have to think about the impact the program is having on student outcomes and base our decisions on these facts. Resource allocation should be based on fact, not favorites.
- **Planning:** We need to understand priorities, make a firm commitment to them, and develop a detailed plan for achieving them. The process of articulating, testing, and revising a strategic plan provides the guiding star. Without a written plan, progress will be minimal and most likely will never be sustained.
- **Resources:** Maximizing resources from the general budget, ESEA/ ESSA funds, and other grant money is crucial. As leaders, we are responsible for using local and federal tax dollars effectively to improve student outcomes. Providing necessary support for administrators and teachers means not only securing funding, but also aligning these resources to student needs. We used data to tell us which programs were the most effective use of our funds.
- **Leadership:** Leaders enable the other conditions for success. With strong support from the superintendent and board of education, we have provided funding for classroom libraries, professional consultants, and other literacy-based resources aligned to our plan. Both support for and the support of principals as instructional leaders matters, too. In fact, developing principals is a nonnegotiable. Principals are the ones in classrooms providing daily feedback and therefore must understand what high-quality literacy instruction looks like.

One of the task force's greatest strengths was also one of its biggest challenges: Each individual brought many different experiences and beliefs to the table about literacy instruction. Everyone on the task force believed the time allocated for reading and writing should not depend on which school or teacher the student was assigned. But beyond that, we needed to establish a common knowledge base of research and best practice.

To build this shared knowledge, we spent a significant amount of time in our first few committee meetings studying the research of literacy experts such as Richard Allington, Debbie Miller, Ellin Keene, and Lucy Calkins. From our readings and discussions, we identified key practices common across the research, including modeling and demonstrating thinking, individual student conferences, and a high volume of reading and writing every day.

We became eager to test out an intentionally designed pedagogical approach aligned to this research and collect evidence on how students responded to it. We developed action research teacher teams made up of small groups of teachers who worked through an action research model (see article on p. 54 about action research communities) to try out instructional strategies such as developing effective and efficient minilessons, structured approaches to individual conferences, note-taking strategies, and increasing reading and writing motivation for all students.

For this strategy to work, participating teachers needed time to collaborate as a team for planning, debriefing, and reflection. Four times throughout the year, we provided released time for these teachers during the school day, using Title II-A funds to provide substitutes.

Although teachers were also expected to put in additional time on

TO LEARN MORE

The pre-K-8 literacy plan for North Kansas City Schools is available at <https://bit.ly/2DhV2Zk>.

their own, and they did, this released time was very important because the teachers worked in different buildings and didn't have either formal or informal time during their workdays to examine data, discuss successes and challenges, or develop strategies to meet the needs of their diverse students.

Data collected from the action research teacher teams informed the work of our committees and of the district overall. Each team collected data in the form of student work, notes from conferences with individual students, and common formative assessments aligned to the Missouri learning standards.

Based on what they learned from the data, teachers would make adjustments to their minilessons and develop additional strategies to support students' needs. They shared this learning and the successful strategies with the committees to drive the work forward at the district level.

SUPPORT FOR PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS

With a new instructional plan for literacy complete, we turned our focus to professional learning support for principals and teachers. It had been several years since most teachers had engaged in district-sponsored professional learning in reading and writing instruction. To support teachers in making the pedagogical shifts called for in the new literacy plan, we needed to make a strong commitment to adult learning.

Our professional learning included four key elements.

We created regular learning

opportunities for teachers and principals across the district. Thanks to Title II-A funds, we were able to hire expert practitioners whose research had driven our approach to lead these sessions, including Debbie Miller, Matt Glover, and Ellin Keene.

We engaged grade-level teacher cohorts in professional learning during the school day several times throughout the year. Initially, principals selected one or two teachers per school, about 150 teachers in all, with the expectation that these teachers would then lead school-based teams in implementing the learning across the school. One of the strategies was for these lead teachers to demonstrate newly learned practices while their colleagues visited their classrooms.

We also developed a principal cohort, comprising all elementary principals and assistant principals, to ensure leaders engaged in the professional learning they needed to best support teachers.

We created demonstration classrooms. These are classrooms whose teachers have strongly aligned their classroom literacy practices to the districtwide, research-based literacy plan. With two of these classrooms in place (we now have 13), we asked elementary school principals to send at least 50% of their staff to these classrooms throughout the school year.

Strongly committed to this opportunity, principals, coaches, and teachers became creative with strategies for classroom coverage and the use of Title I, Title II-A, and general building budget financial resources to allow teachers to visit these classrooms.

We offered coaching support to teachers. The coaches had worked with expert consultants on coaching methods as well as reading and writing instruction.

We developed monthly literacy instruction modules for

IDEAS

principals. We believed that one of the key influences to the success of this literacy plan was the knowledge and instructional leadership of principals, so we redesigned monthly principal meetings, which had been mainly focused on lists of business items. We designed a series of one-hour modules, each of which related to one aspect of our literacy plan. To create consistency, we asked principals to lead this same module with their teachers sometime within the next month.

IMPACT ON TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

The new research-based literacy plan and the professional learning support quickly began to change teachers' and leaders' practices and

within three years had real impact on student outcomes.

Before implementing this model, elementary achievement scores on the Missouri Assessment Program test were typically below the state average in most grade levels. Since then, all grade levels have performed significantly above state averages for four consecutive years, and this includes English learners and the free and reduced lunch population.

Because the state implemented a new assessment in spring 2018, we can't make direct score comparisons before and after the 2017-18 school year, but we know that all groups of students continue to perform above state averages.

Finally, since implementing this model, three schools have been

recognized as National Blue Ribbon schools between 2016 and 2018, and five schools were among the top 25 elementary schools in Missouri in the 2016-17 school year. The district had not achieved either of these distinctions before 2016.

Our experience shows that it pays to invest in teachers and leaders becoming the very best they can be so that students become the best that they can be.

•
Chad Sutton (chad.sutton@nkcschools.org) is assistant superintendent of academic services and school accountability for North Kansas City (Missouri) Schools. ■

Our students, our solutions

Continued from p. 56

customizable, action research communities provide opportunities for schools to target a wide variety of reform initiatives and innovations, even at the most micro levels.

Whereas some schools might focus their professional learning communities on highly specific curricular or social initiatives, schools that operate as action research communities can target a variety of initiatives and problems of practice.

Furthermore, the focus of an action research community can evolve over time, even while the infrastructure remains intact, theoretically for decades. The fundamental structure of an action research community — which includes a focus on research, collaboration, and support — serves as a flexible and powerful mechanism for achieving

an unlimited number of school improvement and reform initiatives.

REFERENCES

DuFour, R., DuFour, R., & Eaker, R. (2008). *Revisiting professional learning communities at work: New insights for improving schools.* Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

Hord, S.M. (1997). *Professional learning communities: Communities of continuous inquiry and improvement.* Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Mertler, C.A. (2016). Leading and facilitating educational change through action research learning communities. *Journal of Ethical Educational Leadership, 3*(3), 1-11.

Mertler, C.A. (2017). *Action research: Improving schools and empowering educators* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Mertler, C.A. (2018). *Action research communities: Professional learning, empowerment, and improvement through collaborative action research.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Mertler, C.A., & Hartley, A.J. (2017). Classroom-based, teacher-led action research as a process for enhancing teaching and learning. *Journal of Educational Leadership in Action, 4*(2).

Oliver, B. (1980). Action research for inservice training. *Educational Leadership, 37*(5), 394-395.

•
Craig Mertler (craig.mertler@gmail.com) is an associate professor of research methods and director of the doctor of education program in leadership and innovation in Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University. ■