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DOCUMENTED
BRIEFING



Partners in Pittsburgh Public Schools' Excellence for All Initiative

Findings from the First Year
of Implementation

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Prepared for the Fund for Excellence



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SUMMARY

Prior to the Excellence for All (EFA) initiative, which began in the summer of 2006, the Pittsburgh Public School District (PPS or *the District*) was facing the risk of state takeover if student achievement results did not improve. The Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) reviewed the District's instructional program, particularly in reading and mathematics. CGCS reported that the District lacked a coherent and consistent instructional model and critically needed districtwide consistency in content and pacing of instruction because of high student mobility within the District. Findings such as these heightened a sense of urgency that motivated a decision by PPS leadership to introduce the Excellence for All plan, a comprehensive, ambitious set of districtwide instructional improvement efforts aimed at promoting its goals through managed instruction (MI).

As part of the EFA strategy, the District contracted with various external partners to provide and/or support a host of educational interventions intended to improve classroom instruction, with the ultimate goal of increasing student achievement test scores. Macmillan and Kaplan K12 (or Kaplan) were contracted to provide curricula, pedagogical approaches, and assessment tools to support their curricula, as well as to provide training on their use. The Institute for Learning (IFL) was contracted to provide professional development (PD) focused on training school administrators and instructional coaches to be effective instructional leaders. America's Choice (AC) was contracted to provide a comprehensive school reform design, incorporating each of the components of MI, in eight previously low-performing schools that have been reconstituted as "Accelerated Learning Academies" (ALAs).

In Year 1 of the implementation of these contracts, the District asked RAND to conduct a formative evaluation of these partners. The aim of this work is to provide formative feedback to District staff, the board, and other stakeholders about the implementation of EFA and to suggest opportunities to strengthen implementation in Year 2.

The guiding research questions for this project is the following:

1. What were principals', coaches', and teachers' perspectives on the primary elements of each partner's intervention?
2. What was the level of implementation and staff buy-in?
3. What issues may have affected the implementation and sustainability of the District's Excellence for All strategy in its entirety?

Question 1 investigated staff members' perspectives on the three primary services or products provided to the District by the partners. These services or products included (a) materials or curriculum, (b) assessments (tools and supporting materials), and (c) professional development. Question 2 was applied in the school-level interviews, in which interviewees were also asked to describe how they were implementing or utilizing the three products and their level of buy-in or how much confidence they had in the products they

were using (see Appendix A for the interview protocols). Additionally, during the course of the interviews, coaches and principals were asked to give their perceptions more generally for these issues and any other issues regarding their school staff as follows:

(a) How was each partner intervention being received and rolled out by school staff?

(b) What were the key supports for and barriers to implementation?

Additional issues relevant to implementation and sustainability also arose pertinent to research Question 3 from responses to these subquestions as well as other comments reported during the interviews. Those data were also analyzed and included in our syntheses.

Data Collection and Research Methods

During this project, we gathered data from multiple sources. Our examination began with efforts to clarify the theory of change (TOC) at work in EFA. Most of the analysis of the TOC occurred in the fall of 2006 through a review of materials from the District describing EFA, contracts outlining the services and materials provided by partners as well as corroborating data from observations of four professional development sessions, and interviews with District central office (nine interviews) and partner staff (ten interviews). District staff were typically interviewed individually, while partner staff were typically interviewed in groups according to partner. Each interview lasted between one and two hours.

Data collection during the spring of 2007 focused on school-level interviews with principals, curriculum coaches, and teachers from a total of 16 randomly selected schools, stratified by grade level. Teachers were randomly selected within schools from among those who worked with at least one of the partner initiatives (Kaplan, Macmillan, America's Choice, or IFL). Interviewees included all principals in the selected schools, 28 curriculum coaches, and 48 randomly selected classroom teachers. To promote openness in responses, interviewees were guaranteed anonymity. Following their selection, all participants were assured that their responses and notes taken during their interviews would be held in confidence by the research staff and that interview notes would be destroyed shortly after the report was written. Interviews were held in a variety of rooms at the selected schools including classrooms, offices, and libraries.

Our goals for the study design were to reduce selection bias through our use of a randomized sample of schools and gather enough responses to generate the majority of the perceptions of the District staff relevant to the topic of interest. We are confident that our findings accurately portray the experiences of those persons interviewed from the District and partner staffs. We are also confident that the views expressed by respondents in this study are likely to be held by many more staff members throughout the District who were not selected to participate in the study. At the same time, the sample of schools and teachers

represented in the study may not represent every perspective within the District. Further, the number of individuals interviewed was not sufficient to statistically generalize perceptions to the entire population of teachers, coaches, and principals in the District. Therefore, all findings in this documented briefing carry the caveat, “according to respondents in our sample.”

Summary of Key Findings

Research on comprehensive school reform suggests that 3-5 years are required for full implementation and significant achievement impact (Berends, Bodilly, and Kirby, 2002). In the PPS, the first-year implementation of EFA saw many challenges, but no more than might have been expected, given the ambitiousness of the initiative. To the contrary, despite the aggressiveness of EFA’s implementation schedule and the inevitable first-year challenges, we saw signs of promise. Below is a summary of our findings by research question.

Question 1: What were principals’, coaches’, and teachers’ perspectives on the primary elements of each partner’s intervention?

According to interviewees in our sample, promising progress was made in Year 1, but further improvements are needed with regard to implementation of each partner’s intervention. In some instances (particularly with respect to Kaplan), course corrections bear some urgency, but we saw no reason to believe that such corrections could not be made. Several of the partners’ products and services were reported as providing useful, concrete support for EFA. Those that rose to the top, according to teachers and principals, were the Macmillan curriculum, AC’s framework, and Kaplan’s data assessment tools. IFL’s services, frequently reported as useful by principals and coaches, were, by design, not a focus for implementation at the classroom level at the time of our interviews. Implementation of IFL’s Principles of Learning was planned to be more visible in the coming year. Additional partner-specific details can be found in Section 4 of the documented briefing. Additionally, respondents frequently spoke of reform components in isolation, suggesting limited understanding of how the pieces of EFA worked together to reinforce the overall agenda of improving academic achievement.

Question 2: What was the level of implementation and staff buy-in?

As was expected, the level of implementation and buy-in varied by partner. The specifics for each partner can be found in Section 4. Overall, our findings were consistent with the adage “what gets measured, gets done,” and 100 percent of the teachers using Kaplan administered the weekly assessments to their students according to the District’s centrally collected data. Additionally, 86

percent of elementary teacher respondents reported an increase in differentiated instruction using Macmillan, i.e., targeting instruction to the varying needs of different students in their classes. These findings are important indicators of implementation of the EFA initiative, since assessment and differentiated instruction were reported to be emphasized by the District in Year 1. (Teachers in middle- and high-school grades reported smaller increases in differentiated instruction, leaving room for additional inquiry into the factors that may have inhibited differentiation in middle- and high-school grades.) However, these numbers must be taken in the context of other findings that suggest room for improvements. For example, while 90 percent of our interviewed teachers reported regularly using the Kaplan materials, 90 percent also reported that the Kaplan materials were inadequate. Similarly, 72 percent and 100 percent of the respondents using curricula from Macmillan and Kaplan, respectively, reported that the pacing requirements necessary to maintain the assessment schedules were too fast. Further, many of our interviewees expressed concerns that materials were being covered too quickly for their students, time was not provided for reteaching as necessary, and that material was not being covered thoroughly enough because of the pacing guidelines.

Question 3: What issues may have affected the implementation and sustainability of the District's Excellence for All strategy in its entirety?

Coaches, principals, central office staff, and professional development appear to be supportive levers of the overall EFA effort, but these levers need further definition and alignment according to respondents. Our evidence supporting this claim includes the fact that principals and teachers emphasized the importance of coaches for supplementing PD provided by the partners and the District. For example, coaches were reported to be critical to deepening and institutionalizing the changes supported through EFA. We were frequently told by principals and teachers just how important coaches were for bridging the gaps in the PD provided to teachers, clarifying the practical use of materials, and providing tailored instructions for using the materials. At the same time, coaches reported a need for their role to be clarified and articulated clearly to principals so that they are not asked to perform functions that take time from their key roles of supporting the implementation of EFA.

Additionally, our examination of instructional leadership revealed room for improvement, because as just over half (56 percent) of principals in our sample were considered instructional leaders by their teachers and coaches.

PPS staff defined effective instructional leaders as those who

- communicate a vision
- structure and protect time for staff learning and collaboration
- use in-house expertise

- have knowledge of student data
- model instruction
- lead PD
- use student data with teachers
- demonstrate in-depth knowledge of content.

For the 56 percent of principals reportedly demonstrating instructional leadership, our examination revealed two forms of effective instructional leadership currently at work in the PPS—*hands-on* and *team-based* instructional leadership. As the terms imply, principals who demonstrated hands-on instructional leadership tended to take on each of the tasks themselves. Principals demonstrating team-based leadership delegated responsibility for some of the instructional leadership roles to coaches and teacher leaders, capitalizing on the strengths at the school. Both hands-on and team-based approaches were reported to be respected by teachers and coaches as effective, and currently we have no reason to view one model as more effective than the other. Our data do suggest, however, that K-5 principals have an easier time being hands-on instructional leaders than principals who run schools that are larger, more organizationally complex, and have a broader curriculum.

Staff respondents valued the central office for supporting implementation but had suggestions for improving the services provided by the central office. Their suggestions included strategies for the central office to optimize planning time for staff and ideas for showcasing best practices from across the District.

Teachers in our sample were largely, though not entirely, satisfied with PD on curriculum content. However, many respondents reported a desire for deeper training on classroom how-to's, especially data use and differentiated instruction. Respondents also reported a need for more applied training on classroom implementation. Additional information on issues that may affect implementation can be found in Section 5.

Recommendations for Improving Implementation in Year 2

Based on our findings, we are making the following suggestions to the PPS central office:

Provide PD that focuses more on the practical application of differentiated instruction in the classroom. School-level respondents suggested that the District could build on a strong start in differentiating instruction through providing PD that focuses more on the practical application of differentiated instruction in the classroom. This request was commonly referred to by teachers and coaches as the “how-to’s” for differentiated instruction. While we recognize the reported emphasis on differentiated instruction in Year 1 as a promising sign, we have concerns regarding whether teachers and coaches as groups and as individuals have the same definition of *differentiated instruction* as the PPS central office. In many interviews, teachers commonly referred to small group work or work stations when referring to differentiated instruction. However, simply introducing small group work does not ensure differentiated instruction is taking place. Further, this definition is qualitatively different than the idea of tailoring the tasks and focus of instruction to meet individual children’s areas of need, which actually could take place in a large or small group. The PPS central office is aware of the need for clarifying the definition of differentiated instruction for staff and has discussed this issue. Once differentiated instruction is clearly defined, coaches might be asked to disseminate this information to teachers. In this case, “Learning Walks” might be useful. Although it was determined that the lack of emphasis on Learning Walks in Year 1 of EFA implementation was by design, Year 2 could benefit from a push to implement Learning Walks as a means of reinforcing differentiated instruction at the classroom level.

Target more professional development on data use. The assessments and data tools that support these assessments are reported to be valued by school-level staff. However, this documented briefing also suggests that use of these tools and assessments might become more widespread and more consistent across the District if professional development focused more on data use and less on computer program use, which was the focus of PD in Year 1 of implementation and which appeared to have been sufficient according to reports. Moreover, additional PD on data use in the context of the realities of time management, behavior management, and curriculum pacing requirements might be helpful for teachers. Further, coaches and teachers reported that site-based PD at the schools would afford personalized and targeted PD that teachers would be more likely to attend, with fewer barriers to accessing these sessions. Additionally, reports indicate that data were being used effectively in various pockets across the District; these effective practices could be communicated districtwide during PD sessions.

In our sample, the strategies and tools supporting data use were touted to be valuable assets for building capacity throughout the District and could be disseminated as best practices through coach networks and among staff during school-level in-services or planning blocks if time were permitted for these types of professional community-building opportunities. Finally, staff requested clear standards for accountability for how they are expected to use data.

Build on existing coach networks to disseminate best practices, create cross-district consistency, and strengthen cross-district professional learning communities. Although more targeted PD for data use was a consistent refrain from teachers and coaches, data are reportedly being used

effectively in various pockets across the District. Many of the coaches in our sample have developed strategies for unit planning and tools that encouraged or supported their teachers to use data more effectively. They also reported that they have shared their ideas or have received tips from other coaches through informal coach networks. The PPS might be able to build on those information networks as a means for building capacity throughout the District and disseminating best practices. Strategies for facilitating coach networks and building planning time included providing contact information and setting up email “aliases” for coaches and providing some unstructured time for coaches to talk during in-service training sessions.¹

Build instructional leadership capacity through promoting team-based leadership in addition to hands-on instructional leadership and an investment in coaches. In our sample, only about half of the PPS’s principals were considered to be instructional leaders by their teachers and coaches. At the same time, there is a strong undercurrent of cynicism as to whether it is possible to perform the tasks of managing the school building and serving as the school’s instructional leader simultaneously. The recognition of the numerous time-intensive responsibilities of principals is not uncommon and has been documented in the literature (Archer, 2004; Grubb & Flessa, 2006). A response to this challenge appears to have sprung up organically within the PPS, namely in the two forms of instructional leadership mentioned earlier (i.e., *hands-on* and *team-based* instructional leadership). Although both models are currently utilized in PPS schools, there seems to be less knowledge about the viability and acceptability of team-based instructional leadership. Although the evidence supporting team-based instructional leadership is mixed, there is a growing literature that schools around the world are practicing team-based or *distributed leadership* in their schools successfully (Grubb & Flessa, 2006). Particularly, Grubb and Flessa (2006) found that when local school sites participated actively with the policy-making process that produced the team-based leadership arrangements, the alternative seemed viable. PPS’s large investment in instructional coaches as part of the EFA model makes distributed instructional leadership a particularly viable strategy. Therefore, we propose attempting to increase the percentage of principals effectively acting as instructional leaders by promoting team-based instructional leadership. Since both models were reported as effective by PPS teachers and coaches, leveraging the in-house capacity within each school into a team that could effectively provide instructional leadership may be a time-efficient means to providing instructional leadership without a personnel change or the time lag necessary to allow the current principals to gain additional skills. Thus, principals would share the leadership work with others in their school, making the task less burdensome, while providing the instructional leadership needed in their schools. Additional capacity for instructional leadership can also be

¹ Email aliases are single email addresses to which subscribers can email everyone in the group.

encouraged by continuing to invest in coaches so that they can continue to share instructional leadership responsibilities with their principals.

Encourage principals to align coaches' tasks with their core roles. A third of the coaches in our sample report being asked to perform functions that are outside of the coaches' roles. At the same time, the success of EFA relies heavily on coaches passing down the training they receive to teachers and facilitating implementation of the components of EFA. This role was reported to be time intensive. Any additional roles outside of those responsibilities took away from the time coaches devoted to their core responsibilities. Therefore, we suggest that principals should be given guidance from the central office on the roles that are within the scope of coaches' functions. Principals should also be encouraged to support coaches in fulfilling functions that are core to their roles, rather than assigning other tasks that may be useful to the school but not germane to the coaches' core functions. Further, we recommend that principals be given the charge of ensuring that coaches are provided with consistent blocks of time to work directly with their teachers.²

Provide more school-based professional collaboration time built into the school year to afford sustainable transfer of information and practice into the schools and classrooms. As a group, school-level staff in our sample valued the districtwide in-services and PD provided in support of EFA. Even still, many in our sample expressed the need for time to meet at the school-building level for training more tailored to their needs. Additionally, school-level staff requested time to work within grade- or subject-level teams to build more professional community at the school-building level. Efforts at both the District-administration and school-leadership levels are necessary to develop workable time management strategies for this type of effort. More school-based collaboration time does not necessarily mean additional time away from students or outside of the contracted professional year. On the contrary, strategies may include adjusting teachers' schedules within grade level or subject area so that common planning periods are created. Additionally, time slotted for districtwide PD may be better spent in individual schools. These school-level PD sessions could be made consistent across the District by determining a particular subject that would be addressed districtwide within individual school-level learning communities.

Ensure that all staff members understand EFA as a coherent strategy. As we state repeatedly in this document, the EFA initiative is an ambitious and complex undertaking. As such, we recommend that the District clearly explain the components of EFA as a coherent strategy, which will help generate buy-in to the separate components. For example, district staff should explain to school staff the ways in which EFA's components are mutually reinforcing and should describe the connections and consistency across the services and materials associated with the external partners.

² In an interim briefing, we suggested to the central office that a clearer and more succinct description of coaches' roles and the jobs that make up the position be established. In a subsequent PPS partner meeting involving PPS central office staff and representatives from the external partners, a completed draft of the coaches' roles was presented that is to be refined and used in Year 2.