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Pittsburgh Public Schools’ Excellence for All

Year 2 Evaluation

Shannah Tharp-Taylor, Catherine Awsumb Nelson, Laura S. Hamilton, Kun Yuan

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The Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) launched its Excellence for All (EFA) initiative in the summer of 2006, partially in response to low levels of student achievement and an accompanying risk of state takeover. As part of the original EFA strategy, the district engaged in a host of educational interventions intended to improve classroom instruction with the ultimate goal of increasing student achievement. In year 1 of the implementation (2006–2007), the district asked the RAND Corporation to conduct a formative evaluation of the district’s efforts. The year 1 work, referred to as the *partners’ evaluation*, was focused specifically on the contributions of a range of external partners engaged by the district to provide professional development (PD), curriculum, and related support. During year 1 of the evaluation, we informed the district about its systemic operations by highlighting implementation challenges at the central-office, school, and staff levels (Tharp-Taylor et al., 2007). We also raised questions relevant to interpartner coordination and identified the critical factors shaping implementation of the district’s instructional-improvement strategy.

In 2007, PPS asked RAND to continue to monitor implementation of EFA. In year 2 (2007–2008), RAND expanded its focus to issues beyond the implementation of services. We built on our initial findings, continuing to provide feedback to district staff about the implementation of EFA and to inform operational areas that may lead to changes in student achievement.

This briefing presents findings from the year 2 study and is structured by key implementation variables that surfaced in the year 1 research, including curriculum implementation, supporting principals and building instructional leadership (IL) capacity, the role of curriculum coaches, and efforts to build instructional capacity.

Specifically, we addressed the following questions:

- Question 1: How well is the district building internal capacity to sustain the reform?
- Question 2: Are partners and the district providing adequate resources and support to implement the curricula?
- Questions 3 and 4: How well are school leaders engaging in effective IL pursuant to the district’s goals?
- Questions 5 and 6: To what extent are teachers implementing the components of EFA?
- Question 7: What are students’ perceptions of their academic experience?

Looking forward, the district will have its best opportunity to date to observe high-fidelity implementation in classrooms in year 3. As it stands, even in year 3, there are curricular changes still being made, which may suggest that adjustments are still being made. That said,
year 3 of EFA should also provide the district a more reasonable and cleaner look at improvements in student achievement, which would not have been expected, given the empirical literature, to present an accurate assessment of the reform’s impact until at least the third year of implementation.

Data Collection and Research Methods

The year 1 evaluation (Tharp-Taylor et al., 2007) relied on interviews from staff in a random sample of 16 PPS schools. The year 2 study builds on themes and findings from the year 1 evaluation and expands the number of participants through the use of both interviews and surveys. In January 2008, we conducted districtwide surveys of all principals (n = 61 of 65, a 94-percent response rate). In May 2008, we administered surveys to all teachers (n = 922 of 2,065, a 45-percent response rate), and all curriculum coaches (n = 111 of 129, an 86-percent response rate). In early February 2008, we conducted surveys of students in grades 5 and 8–12 (n = 2,462, an 83-percent response rate) from a stratified random sample of homerooms across the district. The surveys were intended in part to corroborate or refute findings from year 1, and the content of the surveys was derived from a list of issues and concerns explored in the year 1 study and vetted by PPS.

School staff and student surveys were anonymous. However, in some cases, because of the small number of staff in a given position at a particular school, staff members believed that there was a chance that disclosure of responses could compromise staff members’ identities. For this reason, all those who participated in the surveys were assured that their responses would be held in the strictest of confidence. We are confident that our findings for principals and curriculum coaches are representative of those groups based on their high response rates (94 percent and 86 percent, respectively). However, given the lower response rate for teachers (45 percent), it is impossible to determine whether findings are representative of the larger population of PPS teachers. Therefore all findings from the teacher surveys should be interpreted with caution as reflecting the views of participants in our sample rather than PPS teachers as a whole.

In addition to the surveys, we conducted interviews at the central office (six) and eight schools (with principals [eight], curriculum coaches [15], and teachers [21]). We made an effort to talk with each of the principals and curriculum coaches from the eight schools. Because of time, we requested two or three teachers from each school, who were chosen by the research team based on the content and grade level they taught (e.g., teachers were selected who taught math or reading/English across a mix of grade levels). In year 2, team members used grade-level configuration to help select a total of eight schools they had visited in year 1, to allow comparison of implementation between years 1 and 2. Principal, coach, and central-office staff interviews each lasted between one and two hours. Teacher interviews were conducted to allow 30 minutes per teacher to limit disruption to the school day. All interviewees were guaranteed anonymity to promote openness in their responses and told 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 and offices.

We used frequencies and cross-tabulations to analyze teacher, principal, and coach surveys. We also used t-tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA) to explore the student-survey data. The grounded-theory approach was used to analyze the qualitative data.
Summary of Findings

Tharp-Taylor et al. (2007) report that, though year 1 of EFA’s implementation saw many challenges, there were also promising signs. Year 2 survey results and interviews supported the hypothesis that some concerns were inevitable first-year challenges that would be mitigated as school staff gained experience with the reforms. Further, signs of strength reported in year 1 were substantiated in many ways in year 2. However, some challenges remained. Here, we summarize the findings related to each research question.

Question 1: How Well Is the District Building Internal Capacity to Sustain the Reform?

Here, we examine school-level staff members’ (i.e., principals’, teachers’, and curriculum coaches’) views on the district central office’s capacities and contributions to the rollout and sustainability of EFA, including the following:

a. district PD and curriculum support
b. data infrastructure
c. strategic vision
d. climate: morale and trust.

a. The majority of responding teachers viewed PD, curriculum support, and infrastructure positively. Large majorities of responding teachers rated district PD and curriculum as sustained and focused, connected to school needs and goals, and helpful to improving teaching. In school-level interviews, central-office PD and curriculum staff were praised as being knowledgeable and responsive to school concerns, although some described those departments as understaffed and overwhelmed.

b. The district’s data infrastructure is regarded as a strong resource. The district’s data infrastructure is seen as strong and improving, as evidenced by high reported levels of use and more widely diffused ownership of data. 4Sight achievement data in particular were described as being accessible, user friendly, and timely, providing an important resource for instructional improvement. Central data infrastructure is a key support for increases in differentiated instruction, one of the key pedagogical improvements targeted by EFA. The data infrastructure also supports a more coherent approach to curriculum implementation across classrooms and schools.

c. Staff members understand and praise the reform vision but suggest improvements. Building-level staff saw the central office’s vision for reform as a strength and described expectations as clear and consistent. In school-level interviews, however, praise for the clarity of the strategy was invariably followed by comments about it being overwhelming or unrealistic. School-level staff’s suggested remedy was expressed in strikingly consistent language. They repeatedly used the word “focus” to describe the course correction that they believed would allow them to achieve deeper and more-lasting improvements in instruction.

d. Respondents report frustration and low morale related to implementing new initiatives. Tangible supports, such as curriculum and data, are not the only central-office contributions to reform implementation. The ways in which the central-office staff communicates about change and works with building staff create a climate that can either accelerate or hamper improvement. Our year 2 research suggests concerns in this area that may ultimately affect reform sustainability. Troublingly, in the schools in which we interviewed staff in both
years 1 and 2, morale seemed to be down and frustration up among our respondents. In interviews conducted in both years 1 and 2, many staff described a climate of low morale and a lack of trust between building-level staff and district leadership. We were told during staff interviews that low morale is driven by a perceived lack of respect by central-office staff for the building-level staff’s competence and professionalism. Although some tension and misunderstanding between building and central-office staff are expected in large educational systems, the pace of change under EFA has amplified the sense among some teachers and principals that district leadership does not understand the difficulty of implementing multiple initiatives in the context of the urban classroom. Some principals, curriculum coaches, and teachers also felt that their knowledge and expertise were rarely consulted in the design of new initiatives. One counterexample—the involvement of district teachers in writing the core curriculum for grades 6–12 in year 2—indicates the powerful impact that staff inclusion can have on buy-in. Although significant challenges remain with the core curriculum in the upper grades, from the perspective of nearly all of the building staff we interviewed, including teachers in year 2 of the development process led to significant improvements.

**Question 2. Are Partners and the District Providing Adequate Resources and Support to Implement the Curricula?**

This research question covers new core curriculum in a variety of subject areas and grade levels, specifically the following:

- a. K–5 reading
- b. grades 6–12 core curriculum
- c. Write Tools
- d. America’s Choice® (AC) (in the eight Accelerated Learning Academies, or ALAs).

In response to the question of whether school staff received the support they required, the following curricula and programs demonstrated both promise and challenge.

- **a. The K–5 reading curriculum rollout has been successful.** Survey and interview data strongly confirmed that year 2 of the rollout of MacMillan/McGraw-Hill’s as the new K–5 reading curriculum has proceeded smoothly, building on last year’s generally positive start. A particular perceived strength of this package is the well-developed options for differentiation that are built right into the curriculum.

- **b. The rollout of the 6–12 core curriculum required midcourse corrections, which were viewed as promising.** As reported in year 1 of this research, development and rollout of new core curriculum in grades 6–12 got off to a rocky start, with high levels of frustration about last-minute timing, unrealistic pacing, and the lack of depth of the materials provided. In response to these concerns, PPS scaled back the role of external partner Kaplan K12 Learning Services in this work and increased the role of district staff, including teachers. This change did not go unnoticed. Although 6–12 core curriculum is still not as far down the path as K–5 reading, users see encouraging improvements.

Even at the K–5 level, instructional resources in literacy for the very weakest students, those two or more grade levels below where they should be, remained a challenge mentioned by many literacy teachers and curriculum coaches working with older elementary- and high-school students. Their concerns, expressed in the interviews, were that, though the level of
challenge was often on the reading level of older students who were weak readers, the content was not on their level and therefore would not hold students’ interest.

c. Teachers express enthusiasm for Write Tools but request more training. Survey and interview data suggested a positive if modest start with Write Tools implementation. Teachers and curriculum coaches expressed enthusiasm for the strategies and for the PD they have received while noting that there has not yet been adequate training to support full implementation. Teacher comments suggested that specific structures and strategies for integration with the rest of the literacy curriculum should be a particular focus of further Write Tools training.

d. The AC rollout produced mixed reactions. Results were mixed for year 2 of the rollout of the America’s Choice comprehensive school reform model in the eight Accelerated Learning Academies (ALAs). ALA staff reported strong buy-in to and implementation of the model’s core instructional ideas, including classroom routines and the workshop model. However, frustration with the amount of documentation the model requires was high and increasing. Most ALA staff also reported low satisfaction with the PD and building-level support provided by AC staff.

e. Pacing is a cross-cutting concern related to supporting school staff. Across curriculum areas and grade levels, teachers and curriculum coaches continued to express concerns about aggressive pacing affecting their data use. Though there were strengths in data use in year 2, many of the teachers and curriculum coaches interviewed reported to be struggling to keep up with the pacing. Some teachers reported either eliminating or shortening the remediation suggested by the assessment data in order to keep up with the pacing guidelines. School staff also reported, in the interviews, wondering how they were to keep up with pacing while differentiating. A bright spot in the pacing discussion is that, although a sizable minority of teachers and curriculum coaches still feel that the pacing is overly aggressive in year 2, an example of a strategy that appears to be working (according to what we found in teacher and coach interviews) is the move from a five-day to a six-day cycle in K–5 reading.

Questions 3 and 4: How Well Are School Leaders Engaging in Effective Instructional Leadership Pursuant to the District’s Goals?

Year 2 data showed high levels of teacher and coach agreement that principals are demonstrating IL. In fact, their ratings across a host of specific, IL-related activities (e.g., principal sets high standards for instruction and monitors the quality of instruction in the classroom) suggested that principals are successfully serving in that capacity. The final report on a related RAND study of PPS incentive-based compensation system for principals will have much more to say about IL as practiced by principals and experienced by building staff.

Coaches are making a critical contribution to IL. In year 1, initial data suggested that coaches were a linchpin to EFA. In year 2, our data confirm that coaches are making a critical contribution to school-level implementation of PD and curricula. They play a central role in using data to inform instruction. Their skills are highly valued by the teachers with whom they work; in fact, the major concern that teachers expressed about coaches is that they do not have enough time to work in classrooms with teachers. Additionally, curriculum coaches reported their uncertainty about how they were evaluated by the district.
Questions 5 and 6: To What Extent Are Teachers Implementing the Components of EFA?

Teachers and curriculum coaches report implementation of recommended curriculum and instruction. Almost all building-level staff interviewed endorsed the overall design if not the pace of reform and reported that the new supports were paying off in terms of improved teaching and learning. Surveys show that many of the responding teachers and curriculum coaches agree that the district’s overall mission and specific vision of excellent instruction are clear and that their schools have clear goals and consistent strategies for improving teaching and learning. The most visible improvement in the day-to-day work of instruction from year 1 to year 2 resulted from coaches’ roles in building the capacity within their schools to analyze and act on data. A majority of responding staff agreed that the improved access to data has given them a finer-grained understanding of student learning needs, and these changes have been accompanied by increased teacher confidence in differentiated instruction. The capacity for differentiation has also been buttressed by the resources developed for teaching to various learning levels that have been built into the curriculum, particularly in K–5 reading. With support from all of these factors, most teachers and curriculum coaches interviewed and responding to surveys agreed that rigor was increasing at their schools.

Teachers and curriculum coaches report data-based instructional decisionmaking. The district’s efforts to promote data use for instructional decisionmaking appear to have led to a strong culture of data use among teachers participating in our survey. A large majority of responding teachers reported that they regularly review assessment data to improve instruction, and a somewhat smaller majority of teachers reported regular review of examples of student work. Fewer teachers responded that they regularly accessed assessment data in the new system in Real Time Information (RTI), but these lower numbers may be due in part to the novelty of the system, and it will be important to monitor teachers’ use of the system as they gain familiarity with it.

Teachers cite nonacademic challenges as a hindrance to implementation in some cases. School-level staff described several challenges that reportedly undercut their ability to implement new curriculum and instructional approaches targeted by EFA. Many staff acknowledged that students’ nonacademic needs complicate teaching and learning in urban classrooms. They also cited that the reform design lacked attention to these critical areas of need. While acknowledging budgetary realities, most teachers interviewed felt that the nursing and counseling supports in the schools were inadequate to address students’ health and behavioral challenges and that the failure to address these challenges hindered teachers’ ability to implement the curriculum and students’ ability to learn it.

One of the most consistent and concrete suggestions made by school-level staff for building capacity and improving reform implementation was that they be given more (paid) time to work and plan together. This argument goes to the heart of the district’s theory of managed instruction. School staff argued that the many moving pieces of consistent pacing, aligned assessments, data use, and planning for differentiation require more collaborative, noninstructional time to implement effectively.

Question 7: What Are Students’ Perceptions of Their Academic Experiences?

Large majorities of responding students reported positive reactions to the reforms. Large majorities of responding students reported high levels of engagement in their mathematics and reading classes. For example, they reported that their classes really made them think and that they were asked to participate actively in class. Reported engagement was high among
students at all of the surveyed grade levels and for both black and white students. Nonetheless, fairly sizable minorities of students said that they were usually bored or that their classes were too easy.

Most students also reported that they received the support they needed from their teachers and schools, that their teachers really believed that they could learn, and that teachers noticed when students had trouble learning something. Again, these responses were high across grade levels and racial groups, although there were differences by race for some grades. Moreover, majorities of students held views consistent with the idea of effort-based intelligence—the notion that hard work is largely responsible for how much students learn and achieve. Together, these results suggest that district and school staff have created supportive classroom environments that are focused on promoting student learning.

**Black and white students differed in one key area on their perceptions of their learning experiences.** Although overall levels of agreement were high regardless of race, black and white students, particularly in our elementary sample, differed in the strength of their agreement about the attention they received from their teachers. Across all grades, black students reported lower agreement than white students with the idea that their teachers listened to what they had to say. Additionally, fifth graders’ responses to questions related to their academic environments suggest that black and white students in lower grades may be having different experiences of the care that they feel that they receive from teachers and the support they perceive from their academic environments. Specifically, white middle-school students reported more agreement than black middle-school students with the idea that they had the support they needed to succeed. Further, black students in the fifth grade reported less agreement with the statement that there was at least one adult in their school who cares about them and knows them well. This may be important, because the presence of a caring adult has been found to play a significant role in students’ success (see, e.g., Brewster, 2003; Jennings, 2003). The trend for greater differences in the lower grades between white and black students continued when asked about their math and English/language arts (ELA) classes. White students in fifth grade reported less boredom in math class and more agreement that their math classes were too easy (p < 0.04). In the other grade levels, high-school students reported only one difference by race for items related to each of their in-class experiences for ELA and math (i.e., “Students have the chance to say ideas and ask questions in ELA class” [black, M (mean) = 2.93; white, M = 3.09; p < 0.01] and “I am usually bored in my math class” [black, M = 2.48; white, M = 2.64; p < .02]. White and black students responded similarly for most items about effort-based versus innate intelligence. For these items, there was only one instance in which middle- or high-school students’ responses varied by race: black middle-school students (M = 3.26) agreed more with the item “I can do even the hardest work in my classes if I try” than white middle-school students (M = 3.06; p = 0.02). The same pattern was found in high-school respondents (black, M = 3.08; white, M = 2.91; p < 0.01). There was not a significant difference for this item for fifth graders. Therefore, this finding suggests that students’ perceptions of their ability to succeed does not account for achievement differences between white and black students.
Recommendations from the Year 2 Research for Improving EFA Implementation in Year 3

The data reported in this briefing suggest the following recommendations for further ways to strengthen the ongoing implementation of EFA.

Do a few things well. Focus on a few areas for improvement to allow staff to deepen their understanding and implement effectively. Data collected for this study portray teachers, curriculum coaches, and principals as being generally supportive of the direction of reform but much less in favor of the pace and complexity of it. This suggests that support for and implementation of core instructional-improvement principles are at risk of being lost in what district staff see as a dense thicket of initiatives. We recommend refocusing on a few core ideas in EFA—such as differentiated instruction and instructional-data use—with sustained PD and support from coaches.

Maintain attention on actual use of data for instructional improvement. Though our data suggest that a large majority of responding teachers may be regularly reviewing assessment data to improve instruction, both continued and broad use from those teachers not captured in these data are imperative for sustaining and improving EFA’s goal of quality instruction for all students. Additionally, when these data were collected, teachers were not regularly accessing assessment data in the RTI system. The future direction of this trend should also be observed, and teachers should be provided with encouragement and support to use these data, as needed.

Provide PD and coaching that support teachers in maintaining depth and flexibility within the managed curriculum. For many teachers, a core or managed curriculum is just a few steps away from a scripted or teacher-proof one. Many PPS teachers are struggling to find space for their creativity, professional expertise, and in-depth knowledge of their students’ needs and interests. Whatever the district’s intentions, at the school level, many are hearing a mandate to focus on areas that will be tested on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA), referred to as eligible content, which in the worst case can emphasize decontextualized skills and facts and preclude depth, integration, exploration, and understanding. This may be as much a communication problem as it is a flaw in the actual design of the reform, but it is certainly contributing to low teacher morale. The district should provide PD and encourage coaches to continue to focus on how teachers can adhere to pacing guidelines while still teaching with creativity and for engagement and understanding.

Devote a session during PD to discuss ways in which principals, teachers, and curriculum coaches in exemplar schools have organized time for teachers to plan together and to work with coaches. Time is finite; more time for planning means less time for other necessary tasks. Despite this fact, some schools have found ways to arrange common planning time for their staff. At the same time, the lack of common planning time was an often-repeated refrain when teachers and curriculum coaches were asked what hindered depth and quality of reform implementation. Many teachers and curriculum coaches reported that the most valuable thing an instructional leader can do is to provide time within the school day for teachers to work together and with their coaches. After reviewing their suggestions, we recommend that the district carve out a session during a principal meeting and in other sessions with teachers and curriculum coaches to glean best practices in use in the district for facilitating common planning periods. We also recommend that the district gather suggestions for how teachers can organize informal daily or weekly grade-level planning sessions. Similarly, PPS should suggest
how teachers can find time to use assessment-data findings to adjust their instruction, since staying on pace has been reported as being a challenge.

**Strategize with AC on ways to continue implementation of valuable instructional ideas in AC schools while strengthening support and reducing reporting burdens.** Our data suggest that, while buy-in to and implementation of the core instructional ideas of AC are increasing at the ALAs, overall acceptance of the model is compromised by perceptions of burdensome and unproductive documentation requirements. Extending and deepening the instructional changes under way at the ALAs may require a carefully thought-through reduction in the overall amount of documentation.

**Improve communication and transparency between the central office and school staff.** Many of the concerns related to the management of the reform efforts stem from perceptions that the central office has not communicated fully with school staff nor valued their voices at either the design or implementation stage of reform. Therefore, we suggest that the central office ensure that principals and curriculum coaches understand proposed program changes before they are implemented and ask for feedback and suggestions from staff at each level on how the system can be improved.

**Work with principals to develop a needs assessment and action plan for schools and individuals.** We suggest that executive directors (EDs) work together to develop a standardized strategy for interfacing with their schools. The strategy could include guidelines for the minimum level of contact to be achieved between EDs and their principals, curriculum coaches, and teachers. Further, it should provide a template for discussions and central-office contact as well as a structured opportunity for principal feedback regularly throughout the year.

**Provide training for coaches that supports effective transfer of information to adult learners.** Though our data suggest that the majority of responding teachers have high levels of confidence in coaches’ skills, there were areas critical to transferring knowledge to teachers that could use additional support. For example, training on how to support adult learners, modeling best practices, and effectively presenting material to teachers were areas in which a sizable minority of responding teachers reported that their coaches had moderate or weak skills. Additionally, curriculum coaches’ reports that they do not know how they are evaluated must be addressed.

**Communicate clearly and directly with coaches how their performance is evaluated.** In our data, a large minority of coaches reported not knowing how their performance was evaluated (44 percent). This finding suggests the need for explicit communication on focal areas and tasks so coaches can be confident that they are doing their jobs well. Further, this type of information will decrease uncertainty as well as help channel coaches’ energy in appropriate directions rather than potentially diluting their attention on tasks outside of their role.

**In the near future, the central office should consider sharing with principals and teachers the strategic plan for students’ nonacademic services, the focus of the services the district will provide, and how those student needs can best be met.** PPS administrators commented that a host of activities are under way to address students’ nonacademic needs (e.g., mental health, behavior issues, out-of-school time concerns). Despite this, school staff as a whole did not appear to be aware of the district’s actions in these areas. The perception that the central office is not addressing nonacademic issues undermines building-level support for the overall reform. We suggest that the district share its plans, publicize the services that are available for nonacademic needs, and implement those services with input from school staff.
Further, we suggest that PPS administration publicly acknowledge that students’ nonacademic needs can undermine learning and should be a fully integrated aspect of EFA.

**Develop a strategy to promote teachers and school staff to make connections with their students to meet students’ needs for being heard and supported.** Data from the student survey revealed a few potentially important differences in black and white students’ perceived experiences. Namely, these differences were found in their reported connections with a caring adult, feeling heard and attended to by their teachers, and feeling that they were being provided the necessary help to succeed. The extant literature in this area suggests the powerful positive impact that a caring and connected teacher can have on students’ academic success, including school attendance, school behavior, and math scores. Therefore, we suggest that PPS encourage teachers and counselors to form these types of positive relationships with their students.