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Improving Small-Group Reading Instruction by Building Teacher Capacity for Data Use

Executive Development Program Case Study #7

This case study illustrates how one principal's National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) Executive Development Program (EDP) experience and NISL coaching helped her make strides toward improving reading instruction in her elementary school. Previously, reading instruction involved whole-group instruction and isolated phonics skills, so students had few opportunities to practice reading by themselves. The principal led a school improvement effort that centered on implementing and refining small-group reading time. Her key strategies included developing structures to support small-group reading instruction and building teachers' capacity for instructional decisionmaking and delivery by using performance data on students' reading skills. Despite some contextual challenges hindering implementation, this improvement effort might have contributed to increased teacher capacity in reading instruction and accelerated growth in reading for students over the course of two academic years.

Putting Professional Learning to Work

This case study report accompanies the report *Putting Professional Learning to Work: What Principals Do with Their Executive Development Program Learning* (available at www.rand.org/t/RR3082). The main report presents findings from part of RAND's evaluation of the National Institute for School Leadership Executive Development Program, a leadership program for sitting school principals. The evaluation included nine in-depth case studies to examine what improvement efforts principals attempted in their schools and what strategies they applied to reach their goals.

All the case study reports are available at www.rand.org/t/RR3082.

Overview

This case study features Winona Sawyer, a first-year principal at the start of the EDP.¹ She drew on her 12 months of EDP experience and 1.5 years of NISL coaching to work toward improving small-group reading instruction at Eastdale Elementary School (EES).

This is one of nine case studies RAND researchers conducted as part of an overarching study of the effects of the EDP and paired coaching on principal effectiveness and, ultimately, on student outcomes.² We selected the nine principals from among 26 best-practice candidates nominated by NISL. To learn more about how we selected cases and our methods of analysis, please see the main report, *Putting Professional Learning to Work: What Principals Do with Their Executive Development Program Learning*, at www.rand.org/t/RR3082.

Unlike the other principals featured in these case studies, Principal Sawyer started the EDP in fall 2013, when she was working as a substitute principal at a middle school in the district. She completed the program in spring 2015, when she became the assistant principal (AP) at the middle school. At the time Principal Sawyer first took the EDP, it involved four courses instead of the current 12 units, and participants completed a culminating project at the end of the program instead of the current design, in which EDP participants draft an Action Learning Project

(ALP) at the end of the third unit. Principal Sawyer completed the supplemental three-day Bridging Institute and began receiving NISL coaching in fall 2016, the year this case study begins.³

To describe the changes that occurred in EES, we first set the stage by describing the school context, including previous school initiatives relevant to Principal Sawyer's school improvement effort. We then describe how she developed her ALP, through which she applied the concepts learned in the EDP to her school. Following this, we describe the first and then second year of changes she implemented, highlighting the connections between her actions and core EDP principles and concepts (shown in the text boxes).⁴ After summarizing Principal Sawyer's accomplishments and plans for continuing the school improvement work, we conclude with a discussion of key factors that facilitated or hindered change.

The timeline shows the key activities described in this case study. The activities above the horizontal blue arrow are Principal Sawyer's individual actions, and the ones below are school improvement activities in which staff at EES engaged.

Context for Principal Sawyer's School Improvement Effort

As shown in the timeline, Winona Sawyer became the principal of EES in fall 2015, after ten years of working at other schools in the district as a middle school teacher, reading specialist, and AP. EES is a kindergarten through fourth-grade school in an inner-city district in Pennsylvania. The school served approximately 500 students, all of whom were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch; a significant percentage of students spoke English as a second language. Historically, EES had been low-performing academically, with fewer than 20 percent of students scoring

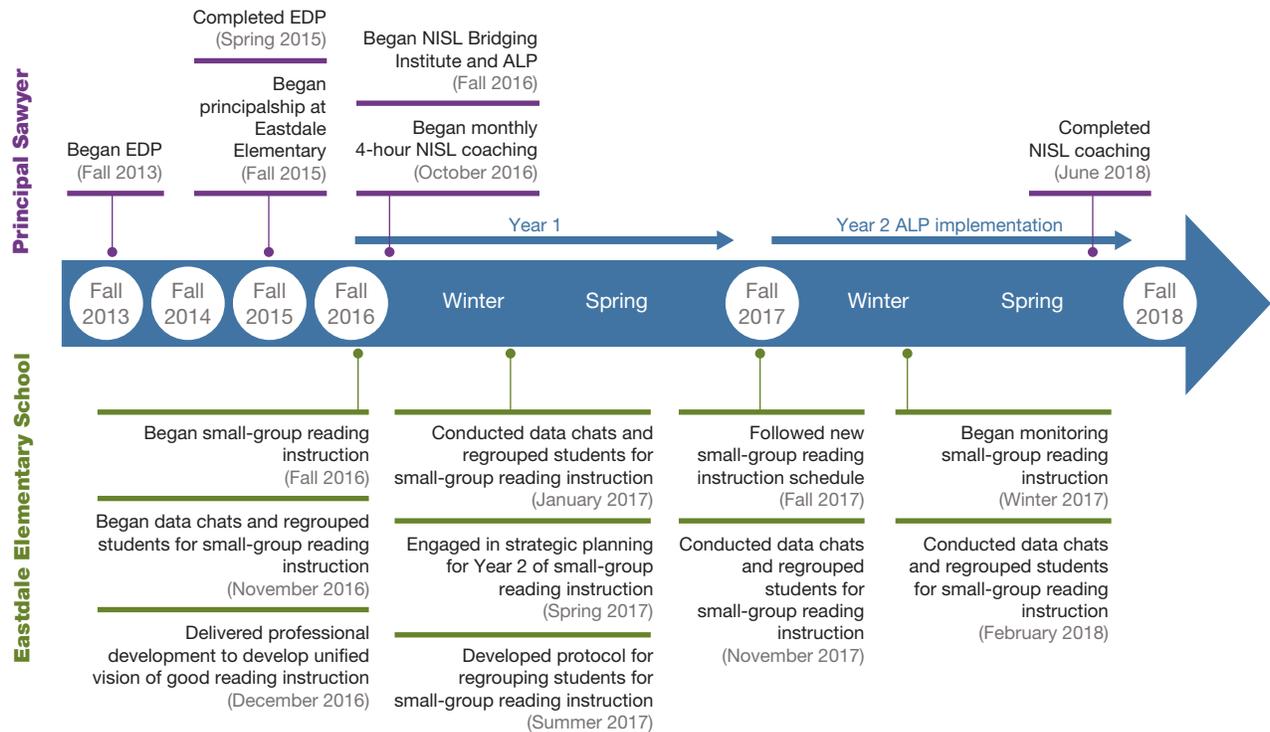
¹ Names of individuals and schools are aliases to protect confidentiality.

² To gather perceptions of how Principal Sawyer worked to improve her school, we conducted a series of interviews and focus groups over two school years. We visited EES in May 2017 and May 2018 to (1) individually interview Principal Sawyer and key implementers of her improvement effort, including her assistant principal, instructional coach, and reading consultant; (2) conduct four focus groups with teacher leaders and teachers; and (3) observe classes. In addition, we conducted hour-long phone interviews with Principal Sawyer in September and November 2017. At these four points, we also interviewed Principal Sawyer's NISL coach. Finally, in spring 2017, we interviewed Principal Sawyer's direct supervisor, the district superintendent. The information we present within this case is drawn from our coding of transcribed interviews and from school documents we collected. We note limitations in our data: (1) Our data were all qualitative in nature and mainly self-reports, and (2) because we spoke with selected individuals, their views may not necessarily represent the views of all staff at the school.

³ The Bridging Institute provided a refresher of EDP concepts and provided updates on the aspects of NISL's model that had changed from Principal Sawyer's previous EDP experience.

⁴ Throughout the case, *Year 1* refers to the school year (or part thereof) in which the principal first started implementing the ALP. *Year 2* refers to the subsequent year of implementation. Each year may not be a full 12-month year.

Timeline of Key Activities Related to Principal Sawyer’s School Improvement Effort



proficient or higher in mathematics and reading on the state assessment.

After arriving at EES, Principal Sawyer actively sought input and incorporated feedback from staff in her decisions and actions. In fact, it was with the input of teachers that Principal Sawyer identified improving reading instruction as a priority shortly after arriving at the school. Reading curriculum in the district had been inconsistent in the past; within a few years, the school moved from a balanced literacy approach to a curriculum series with an additional phonics component. EES had previously implemented an intervention time to help remediate students’ reading skills. The intervention time took place during a 30-minute block for each grade, with students grouped into “core,” “strategic,” or “below basic” groups according to their overall scores on progress-monitoring measures of early reading skills (but not their specific skill deficits). When Principal Sawyer conducted classroom walkthroughs to learn more about reading instruction at EES, she found that students were spending very little time reading during classroom instruction or intervention time.

Instead, students typically worked on isolated phonics skills or listened to teachers reading a text aloud. Furthermore, she observed a disconnect between intervention time activities and the regular reading classes.

Principal Sawyer created a comprehensive improvement plan in collaboration with her staff during the summer after her first year at EES, with a rough plan to initiate small-group reading instruction time. One teacher leader expressed appreciation for being included in discussions of school improvement under Principal Sawyer’s leadership:

I’ve been in the district for 25 years, and I’ve had many principals, and a lot of times it’s just you’re told, you’re told, you’re told. And last year and this year both, I think we have more of a voice, where they don’t tell us exactly what they want. They kind of let us figure that out, but they want to hear what we have to say about things and then kind of work with us. I know they have an idea where they want us to go and they steer us there, but it’s not shoved down our throats, as it’s been in years past.

Designing the Action Learning Project

In fall 2016, Principal Sawyer attended a NISL three-day Bridging Institute and received coaching to help her iteratively develop and implement a new ALP. Principal Sawyer began working with a NISL coach in October 2016. Her coach had more than ten years of experience coaching principals and was a former principal herself, although it was her first year as a NISL coach. Principal Sawyer and her coach met monthly in person for half-day coaching sessions and also by phone over the course of the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 school years. Typical coaching sessions involved planning for and reflecting on ALP implementation, reviewing core NISL concepts and resources, and observing Principal Sawyer as she interacted with her staff and debriefing afterward with feedback.

Using EDP Tools and Data to Inform Focus of School Improvement Effort

As mentioned above, Principal Sawyer began to focus on reading instruction in the summer of 2016, before beginning her ALP process. The NISL diagnostic tools and work with her coach helped Principal Sawyer refine her understanding of the problem. The diagnostics identified high-quality teaching and instructional decisionmaking as the most pressing areas for improvement. Examining progress-monitoring data with her NISL coach, Principal Sawyer recognized that EES had a major drop-off in student reading scores between kindergarten and first grade. Furthermore, students in third and fourth grades lacked foundational reading skills. In the previous school year, only approximately 16 percent of third-graders and 18 percent of fourth-graders scored proficient or advanced in English language arts on the state assessment. Principal Sawyer decided to concentrate on small-group reading instruction for first and second grades.

Developing a Vision and Strategies for Improving Small-Group Reading Instruction

Principal Sawyer laid out a **vision** for improving reading instruction with her ALP:⁵ to increase foundational skills through small-group reading instruction and improve high-quality teaching through systematic professional development (PD) and feedback.

Her **strategic intent** for improving small-group reading instruction read as follows:

- The theory of this ALP is that if we focus on increasing high-quality teaching and teacher craft knowledge in small-group instruction, then we will improve and accelerate student reading performance at every grade.
 - Objective 1: All teachers will know what content and skills should be mastered at each level, good instructional strategies for teaching those skills, and appropriate resources to use to teach those skills.
 - Objective 2: All teachers will be able to use multiple data points to determine areas of need in reading, plan instruction, monitor progress, and reflect and change instruction if needed.

Early on, Principal Sawyer identified the **key strategy** needed to implement her ALP: building teachers' knowledge and capacity for small-group reading instruction. She laid out specific **action steps** that she would take to implement this strategy, including establishing a common vision for quality reading instruction, providing PD on quality reading instruction, and providing ongoing, embedded support for teachers' reading instruction, data collection, and analysis. The NISL coach helped Principal Sawyer identify a second strategy to achieve her ALP vision: establishing structures to support small-group reading instruction. Her action steps for this strategy included adjusting the master schedule to designate time for small-group reading instruction, creating a data warehouse for progress-monitoring data, and

⁵ Terms in bold indicate key components of the ALP that principals were to develop and articulate.

creating protocols for reviewing progress-monitoring data and for grouping and regrouping students in small groups.

Principal Sawyer identified several **resources and supports** that would be important for ALP implementation, including a district-based reading consultant who was assigned to support EES part-time along with other schools in the district, a full-time instructional coach with strong knowledge of reading instruction, and several capable reading teachers in the building. Moreover, the district had recently begun using a new phonics curriculum for kindergarten through second grade. Both the reading consultant and instructional coach had expertise in this curriculum. Principal Sawyer believed that it would be important to leverage their expertise, support teachers in implementing the phonics curriculum, and help teachers learn to make connections between the phonics curriculum and their small-group reading instruction during intervention time.

The First Year of Implementing the Action Learning Project

In her first year of receiving NISL coaching and Bridging Institute activities (2016–2017), Principal Sawyer simultaneously developed and began implementing aspects of her ALP. Principal Sawyer determined that it was necessary to begin ALP implementation immediately because of the urgent need to improve reading achievement at EES. In Year 1, Principal Sawyer focused on getting a small-group reading intervention time in place, planning for PD and ongoing support for teachers to elevate the quality of small-group reading instruction, and creating structures that promote data use.

Strategy 1: Sharing the Vision and Establishing Expectations for Small-Group Reading Instruction

Principal Sawyer launched the school year by sharing her vision and establishing expectations for small-group reading instruction. During the summer of 2016, she adjusted the master schedule (with input from staff) to create a 50-minute intervention time

for each grade, replacing the previous 30-minute intervention time and adjusting other class lengths. At a schoolwide meeting at the start of the school year, she formally announced that the 50-minute block would be used for small-group reading instruction.

Specifically, teachers would conduct reading instruction with a small group of 10–12 students in the same grade and with similar reading ability and learning needs. Principal Sawyer would work with teachers to look at student data and group students according to needs. Ongoing progress-monitoring and regrouping of students were essential parts of this plan. Teachers were to collect Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) progress-monitoring data at least monthly (every two weeks for students receiving the most-intensive interventions) and assess students' Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) reading levels three times per year.⁶ Staff planned to analyze data in grade-level teams and regroup students twice per year—once in November and again in February. Students were grouped and regrouped according to both their DIBELS benchmark and DRA data. If students showed significant progress (or lack thereof) between regroupings, staff used DIBELS progress-monitoring data to move individual students to more appropriate groups.

Small-group time was intended to supplement whole-class reading instruction (during which students received instruction in the phonics curriculum in kindergarten through second grade) and provide an opportunity for students to receive more individualized support concerning their specific reading needs (e.g., phonemic awareness, blending sounds, or reading fluency). During these 50-minute sessions, teachers were instructed to break their group of 10–12 students into two groups of five to six students. One group received targeted reading instruction from the teacher, while students from the other group worked on phonics or other reading activities at centers or on computers. Principal Sawyer was able to guarantee a low student-to-teacher ratio by also assigning support staff, including two reading

⁶ The DRA gauges a student's reading capabilities. It identifies a student's reading level, accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.

specialists, two ESL (English as a second language) teachers, and one Title 1 teacher to work with students during intervention time.

Teachers largely credited the smooth rollout of the intervention time to Principal Sawyer's strong organizational skills and communication with teachers. Unlike previous intervention periods EES had attempted, the intervention time was protected as a priority and happened consistently. When teachers were absent and substitutes were unavailable to cover their intervention groups, the other teachers appreciated that they were given advance notice when additional students had to join their intervention groups.

Strategy 2: Planning for Professional Development

By the time Principal Sawyer began working with her NISL coach in October 2016, she had already been planning for PD to strengthen small-group reading instruction. Early conversations with the coach, however, caused her to shift her approach to PD. Principal Sawyer reflected on her coach's influence:

I remember her saying to me, "Well, who's good at reading instruction right now?" I was like, "Uh—I could pick a couple people off my hands." She's like, "Well, how do you know?" I was like, "Because I watch it and it looks good?" She's like, "What is 'looks good?'" I couldn't tell her what is "looks good." She's like, "If you don't know and you can't quantify what good reading instruction looks like, how are your teachers going to be able to achieve what good reading instruction looks like? How can you expect them to know?" That process of what skills do they need, what does it look like, what do we need to know. . . . I wouldn't have

EDP Core Concept

Effective leaders set and communicate a shared vision. They seek a commitment from all involved to work toward the vision, and they work to integrate that vision into the daily work and culture of the organization. This helps to support sustainability of the transformation.

started to explore that. We wouldn't have done PD on "What skills do you need?"

Following this pivotal conversation with her NISL coach, Principal Sawyer worked with the coach to plan a half-day PD session in December for teachers to focus on what good reading instruction should look like across grade levels. Principal Sawyer hung chart paper around the room, with each chart representing a different reading level from the DRA. DRA levels are more fine-grained than grade levels, and students are expected to progress through multiple DRA levels at each grade level. Teachers formed cross-grade groups and walked around to each chart, writing notes about the characteristics of readers at each DRA level, what students would need to know, what instruction should entail, and what activities teachers might use. Teachers then repeated the activity in grade-level groups, writing with a different colored marker. Finally, Principal Sawyer had each group assess whether certain instructional practices and types of activities were appropriate or not for a given grade. Principal Sawyer revisited and refined these charts with teachers in grade-level teams during subsequent grade-level meetings.

The outcome of the PD was a consensus among teachers and specialists, including the instructional coach and reading consultant, of what good reading instruction should look like for students at each DRA level. Teachers recalled that this PD clarified and unified their vision around what reading instruction should entail.

Strategy 3: Providing Ongoing, Embedded Support

In addition, Principal Sawyer used existing grade-level meetings and the expertise of her instructional coach and reading consultant to provide ongoing, job-embedded support for teachers to strengthen their small-group reading instruction. Principal Sawyer believed that teachers would be better equipped to design effective small-group reading instruction and deliver more-effective whole-class instruction if there were ongoing modeling of and training in the components of effective phonics instruction and group discussions of student data.

EDP Core Concept

In high-performing schools, teams for each grade level and subject are established and meet regularly. These teams are to be the engine of school improvement, driven by the professional staff of the school.

The weekly grade-level meetings became a structured time for teachers to develop their skills and knowledge related to small-group reading instruction. Principal Sawyer joined the grade-level meetings on a weekly basis. She led teachers in talking about their reading instruction needs, reviewing student data, using data to regroup students in small groups, and refining their vision of good reading instruction. The reading consultant and instructional coach also attended grade-level meetings at least monthly to provide training on specific reading instructional strategies and the phonics curriculum.

In addition, the reading consultant and instructional coach supported teachers by regularly visiting classrooms to model strategies for teachers, observe teachers, and debrief teachers on their observations. To guide their classroom visits and provide clear expectations for teachers, they developed and used a fidelity checklist for the phonics curriculum. They also developed a guide for teachers that included benchmarks of where students should be in the curriculum at different points in the year. These tools grew out of Principal Sawyer's observations that teachers were often not implementing the phonics curriculum with fidelity and that they struggled to find time to deliver all components of the curriculum.

Lastly, the reading consultant introduced teachers to decodable texts, which are short readings specifically designed to contain only words with phonics skills that have already been taught to students. The consultant devoted significant time to helping teachers and administrators understand how these texts could help students become stronger at decoding and more confident, independent readers, as well as how they could incorporate these texts into their intervention time. The school already had a set of decodable texts, but teachers did not understand the value of

EDP Core Concept

High-quality teachers participate in activities to strengthen their teaching skills, including critiquing and being critiqued by others, mentoring and being mentored, and being exposed to best practices and research.

these or how to incorporate them into intervention time until this guidance from the reading consultant.

Teachers spoke positively of the learning opportunities afforded to them through grade-level meetings and by the reading consultant and instructional coach. In group interviews, teachers voiced an appreciation of the clear guidance from the reading consultant and instructional coach around the phonics curriculum and pacing. Although the pace at which they should move through the curriculum felt ambitious, teachers appreciated the transparency in the expectations. Teachers also spoke of the value Principal Sawyer brought to grade-level meetings. Principal Sawyer was skilled with using technology and was able to pull up relevant student data, lead discussions on the progress-monitoring of early reading skills and DRA data, and use these data to regroup students in an efficient way. Several teachers spoke of the reading consultant and instructional coach as reliable sources of support as well. They believed that these specialists were readily available to them and that they provided guidance that was directly applicable to their students' reading needs.

With this ongoing, embedded support, teachers made substantial changes to the way small-group reading instruction was delivered at EES. Previously, students received whole-class phonics instruction and small-group interventions related to isolated reading skills. These two types of instruction were not cohesive and did not afford students many opportunities to actually engage in reading. After Year 1 of Principal Sawyer's ALP implementation, teachers learned to plan for more targeted small-group reading intervention time covering specific reading deficits. Teachers learned to connect the phonics curriculum to the reading of text during intervention time by using decodable texts. As a result, students spent more time reading texts that

EDP Core Concept

High-quality instructional systems incorporate formative assessment processes that enable teachers to understand whether or not students are grasping the material being taught.

were accessible to them, given their specific reading abilities.

Strategy 4: Creating a Data Warehouse

To support teachers in making data-driven instructional decisions, Principal Sawyer developed a data warehouse. This warehouse (in the form of a Google spreadsheet) contained all student reading progress-monitoring data, including the unit that students were working on in the phonics curriculum, their early reading skill progress-monitoring scores, and their DRA level. Previously, these data were not collected as frequently or consistently and were housed in different places. Teachers reported that the new Google spreadsheet was a big improvement and helped them to become more well-versed in student data and reading needs, while also making regrouping easier.

Strategy 5: Creating a Protocol for Data Chats

The NISL coach provided Principal Sawyer with valuable guidance to create a protocol for regular “data chats” between her and teachers. The NISL coach prompted Principal Sawyer to think more deeply about how she and teachers would know when students had achieved sufficient growth. These conversations guided Principal Sawyer to think about identifying targets that students should be reaching at different points in the year to achieve at least a year’s growth in reading within an academic year.

Principal Sawyer drafted a protocol that she and her AP would use to guide periodic data chats with teachers to examine students’ most recent progress-monitoring of early reading skills and DRA level, determine whether individual students were achieving sufficient growth, set targets for what

EDP Core Concept

High-quality school teams employ systems for continuous improvement. They implement research-based practices, create and execute plans to assess their progress, and adjust course until their goal is reached.

would constitute sufficient growth by their next data chat, and discuss what instructional changes may be needed to reach the targets. Teachers were to collect progress-monitoring of early reading skills and DRA data regularly and be ready to share these data points for the students in their intervention group during data chats. Principal Sawyer shared this protocol with teachers in their grade-level meetings in fall 2016 so that they would know what to expect. She had her AP begin holding data chats with all kindergarten through fourth-grade teachers, reading specialists, and learning support and ESL teachers in November 2016. These data chats were guided by a form in which teachers entered recent student data and data from the beginning of the year. The administrator and the teacher examined these data points, discussing which students were growing and which students were not. The protocol prompted teachers to think about whether students were on track to make sufficient growth in order to achieve more than one year of reading growth by the end of the year, according to progress-monitoring of early reading skills. It guided teachers to set goals for each student and consider how they would change their instruction to help students achieve those goals by the next data chat. These data chats continued throughout the year.

Evidence suggested that these data chats helped create a common understanding among teachers of what constituted sufficient growth for students and reinforced a routine of making instructional decisions based on data. Principal Sawyer reported that teachers seemed more aware of targets to be met by the end of the year and that she heard teachers referring to these targets to anchor discussions in grade-level meetings. Teachers likewise described these data chats as helpful and regularly referred to targets for student reading performance in focus group interviews.

The Second Year of Implementing the Action Learning Project

In her second year of ALP implementation (2017–2018), Principal Sawyer continued efforts to strengthen teachers' small-group reading instruction and refine protocols and structures related to the intervention time. Conversations with her NISL coach at the end of the previous year and over the summer, as well as feedback from teachers, shaped her approach.

Strategy 1: Developing a Protocol for Regrouping Students

Sessions with her NISL coach at the beginning of Year 1 helped Principal Sawyer realize the need to develop a protocol for grouping and regrouping students in intervention groups based on their data. The NISL coach observed a meeting between Principal Sawyer and the AP in which they brainstormed action steps that needed to occur for the coming year, including developing this protocol, and the coach helped them strategically order and prioritize their approach. Principal Sawyer realized that this protocol would take time to develop and must be ready before the start of the school year, so she met with her AP, the instructional coach, the reading consultant, and the NISL coach over the summer to begin this task.

The school had previously used one measure of student reading to create intervention groups: either progress-monitoring of the early reading skills score or the DRA level. These different types of scores provide only one aspect of students' reading skills, and Principal Sawyer believed it was important to triangulate across multiple types of data to get a more holistic sense of students' needs. The reading consultant led the team in developing a new protocol that incorporated students' DIBELS data, their DRA level, and the last phonics curriculum unit that they mastered from the previous year. The team used this protocol to create student groups for the beginning of the 2017–2018 school year and again in November and February in grade-level teams.

An influx of new students at the start of the school year presented challenges when grouping

students for intervention time. EES received approximately 100 new students, who were displaced because of a hurricane, for the 2017–2018 school year. These new students needed to be tested and placed into intervention groups, which slowed the start of intervention time for the year. Accommodating and planning to meet the needs of new students made for a hectic start to the school year and resulted in larger intervention and phonics curriculum groups for teachers, because the school gained only one staff member to accommodate the new students.

Strategy 2: Altering the Master Schedule

Feedback from teachers and conversations with her NISL coach helped Principal Sawyer better understand the shortcomings of the Year 1 schedule for intervention time. She identified a disconnect between phonics instruction and the small-group reading instruction that students received during intervention time, particularly for first and second grades. In Year 1, teachers used the phonics curriculum with their whole class but worked with smaller and potentially different groups of students during intervention time. This instruction also happened at different times of the day. Principal Sawyer worked to rearrange the schedule so that the phonics curriculum and intervention time occurred in back-to-back periods of 45 minutes each, which created a 90-minute reading block for first and second grades. Additionally, teachers would now teach the phonics curriculum in small groups and work with the same group for intervention time. This change was meant to provide more time for first- and second-grade teachers to provide small-group reading instruction and greater continuity between phonics instruction and intervention time.

Teachers believed that this change accomplished these goals and that they were becoming even more attuned to their students' specific reading needs. They described being able to cover more of the components of phonics instruction in these smaller groups and being able to cover more units, and they said that they felt more confident in their small-group reading instruction. The school's policy was

that students are ready to move to the next phonics curriculum unit when they score 80 percent or higher on the unit assessment. Teaching the phonics curriculum in small groups allowed teachers to better adjust their instructional pace to their students' needs. Teachers found that they were able to move through units more quickly and with greater student success. The principal and instructional coach also observed teachers making more connections between phonics instruction and their small-group reading instruction during intervention time, prompting students to apply their decoding skills to read leveled texts.

Strategy 3: Providing Ongoing, Embedded Support

Principal Sawyer continued to work toward building teachers' knowledge and capacity for small-group reading instruction during intervention time. Principal Sawyer had planned to devote some of the PD release time allotted by the district to this effort, but the time needed be used to address unforeseen district-wide challenges, including the influx of new students displaced by a hurricane. Without these PD sessions, Principal Sawyer relied on grade-level meetings as the primary means for teachers to receive training and support for small-group reading instruction. Principal Sawyer continued to meet with grade-level teams each week, and the instructional coach continued to provide training in instructional strategies in addition to modeling and debriefing with teachers outside of the meetings. The reading consultant worked less directly with teachers in Year 2 and focused on supporting administrators and the instructional coach as they thought about how they would monitor the outcomes of intervention

EDP Core Concept

High-quality instructional systems use formative assessment processes that allow teachers to use their research and craft skills to accurately diagnose student problems and to identify the best possible solution to providing students with the support they need.

EDP Core Concept

High-quality schools are organized so that teachers get frequent feedback from their colleagues and school leaders on their practice, enabling them to constantly grow and improve their expertise.

time. The resources that the instructional coach and reading consultant developed the prior year helped to refresh teachers' understanding. Grade-level teams revisited the expectations for what reading instruction should look like for each reading level and received a guide, developed by the reading consultant and instructional coach, on specific instructional strategies to use for certain reading skill deficits.

During teacher focus groups, teachers largely agreed that Principal Sawyer had established strong supports to help ensure the success of small-group reading instruction and of students. One teacher said,

We have so much support in this building, it is awesome. . . . Case in point, I had one [student] that could read a book on level 18, but . . . no comprehension. We had him in the highest group, but we had to move him back to start working on vocabulary and things. He could read anything, but he just didn't understand the vocabulary. Now with [the instructional coach] coming in and giving us ideas and all of us working together as a team in first grade, he is now back in the [highest] group and doing a good job at reading. It took our whole team to work on what we needed to do in his intervention group to figure out what to do for him.

Evidence of Progress

The end-of-year DIBELS composite scores suggested some evidence of progress. Across all grades (kindergarten through fourth), the percentage of students requiring intensive support decreased from 65 percent at the beginning of the year to 59 percent, and the percentage requiring only core support (i.e., the most proficient group of students) rose from 21 to 26 percent. The difference in the percentage of students in the most proficient group in first and second

grades was more pronounced than the average across grades. Eight percent and 9 percent more students, respectively, needed only core support (from 15 percent to 23 percent in first grade and from 22 percent to 31 percent in second grade).

Anecdotally, teachers reported in their focus group that they advanced approximately nine units further than they previously had in the phonics curriculum based on students' successful mastery of the units. Teachers described seeing their students demonstrating more-advanced skills than they had previously seen at their grade level. Teachers agreed that students were more confident in their ability as readers. A first-grade teacher said,

I've gotten farther this year. . . . They are reading more and checking themselves. They are talking about punctuation and how your voice should change . . . and they can pull apart a sentence and talk about it. . . . We are in first grade, and these guys didn't know all of their letters at the beginning of the year, and they didn't know all their sounds, and they couldn't write their name some of these kids in my group, and here we are doing some really great things. They are grabbing books and they are saying that they can read. That's great.

Even the music teacher, who did not teach reading directly, noticed that students were less likely to "shut down" when they encountered reading in her class.

Teachers believed that Principal Sawyer's school improvement effort helped them develop their reading instruction and data use. The reading consultant reported seeing a shift toward teachers becoming more adept with individualizing their instruction using multiple types of student reading data. As she described,

I've noticed this year . . . that teachers have begun to differentiate. They used to all use whatever level was on the DRA in their small groups, and kids could not read [the texts] because they didn't know all their letters and all the pre-skills. . . . I've noticed with the small groups that now I'm seeing more decodable text for kids, and I'm seeing skills groups for kids that need it. So, we went from a real global kind of approach down to a very focused

We went from a real global kind of approach down to a very focused approach for what each group of kids needs. So that's very exciting to see.

approach for what each group of kids needs. So that's very exciting to see.

During a grade-level meeting, Principal Sawyer was encouraged when she saw multiple teachers advocating for using data to group new students into intervention groups in their grade-level teams, rather than adding students to the smallest group, as one teacher suggested.

Teachers also demonstrated strong ownership and buy-in toward implementing intervention time. Teachers largely agreed that intervention time was more effective at meeting students' reading needs than previous structures and approaches to reading instruction. The additional time and smaller group setting was needed, they believed, to better understand students' reading needs and tailor instruction accordingly. Several teachers said that intervention time was their favorite time of day, because they enjoyed working with students in smaller groups and felt more confident that they were meeting students' needs.

Teachers in the focus group agreed that intervention time was helping to further instill a common vision of reading improvement and a culture of shared responsibility for the success of all students in the school. One teacher told a story that she believed exemplified the school culture that small-group reading instruction helped to cultivate:

At the end of the day, one of the other teacher's kids comes over and gives me a hug on his

way out, and he's not in my classroom, but he comes through and gives me a hug. Then he goes and gives [another teacher] a hug, and then he goes and gives [a third teacher] a hug on his way out. This switching of groups . . . it's the idea all these children are all of our children. They don't have just one teacher. We are responsible for each other. All of us are a team. The children are on our team with us, and we are all working towards the same goal, and that is growing our brains. This intervention time concept, this phonics curriculum, switching these guys is about getting them to where they need to be, and that is becoming a reader.

EES's success with implementing the reading intervention time caught the district's attention. Principal Sawyer said that the district decided to require other elementary schools to include a small-group period like EES's intervention time in their literacy block. She was skeptical that simply allotting time for small-group reading instruction would improve reading instruction if other schools' efforts did not involve collaborative planning and generating buy-in from teachers. She believed that these were important precursors to the change she made at EES:

I have shared my schedule with the other principals. I talked about it a little bit. I think it's more than that. I don't know that they're going to be able to successfully implement. We spend a lot of time. . . . Two school years ago, it was my first year here, and a lot of discussions with the staff about what can we do, how can we get kids reading more. There was a lot of that brainstorming and talking about there seems to be an issue here. How can we fix it? Our staff was really open to, we changed our plan because we want to do something different to try to fix an issue. I don't know that you can get a staff to buy into a new plan without that process, so I don't know. Everyone has a mandate, and I've shared some things, but I don't know how successfully it will happen and what they have turned around to do with their staff.

Student growth in reading was not yet evident in state assessment scores, which began in third grade. Principal Sawyer's efforts targeted first and second grades, where students were far below grade level, and she believed that it may take a couple of years to

show improvement in state assessment scores. Higher scores could provide suggestive but not definitive evidence that the implementation of intervention time contributed to student achievement

Plan for Upcoming Years

Principal Sawyer and her staff planned to continue implementing and refining intervention time in the future. Although the district highlighted EES's literacy approach as a model for the district, teachers expressed concern that a shift in district priorities or a new initiative could eliminate intervention time. Although students in first and second grades had demonstrated growth (according to teachers), they still needed to develop a plan for remediating instruction for students who lacked basic reading skills in third and fourth grades. Additionally, Principal Sawyer and her AP considered creating a similar intervention time for mathematics, which assessments indicated was also low in student achievement and growth.

Factors That Facilitated and Hindered Change

Facilitators of Change

Our analysis indicates that the following factors facilitated Principal Sawyer's ALP implementation:

- **Shared recognition of reading instruction as a priority area of improvement.** Principal Sawyer had been engaging in discussions with her staff around strengthening reading instruction since first joining the school in fall 2015. Her first year involved gathering progress-monitoring and assessment data, reflecting on the data, and engaging in discussions with teachers to identify which problems should be prioritized and how they might be addressed. Along with her staff, Principal Sawyer identified improving reading instruction as a priority. She began revising the school's comprehensive improvement plan with staff to reflect this priority in summer 2016 before beginning the Bridging Institute

and NISL coaching. Although her ALP helped Principal Sawyer fine-tune her strategies for improving reading instruction, she had already laid the groundwork for building a common vision with her staff by collaboratively identifying reading as a problem and beginning to plan for how it could be improved.

- **Administrator strategies to build trust and buy-in from teachers.** The high degree of trust and admiration that teachers expressed toward Principal Sawyer and the AP facilitated their ability to lead the intervention time reform at EES. In focus groups, all teachers expressed the belief that the administrators would not ask anything of teachers that they would not do themselves and that the administrators often went above and beyond. One teacher told a story about coming to the school on a snow day to find the administrators plowing and shoveling the snow. The teacher was moved: “They take pride in this place . . . like nobody has ever taken pride . . . and people see it . . . and that makes us want to work for them.”

Teachers also appreciated Principal Sawyer’s strong organizational skills. She approached changes, including intervention time, with the details well thought-out and with strong systems in place, which in turn made for smooth transitions for teachers.

Furthermore, teachers noted that both Principal Sawyer and her AP were good listeners and regularly sought teachers’ views when guiding school decisions. Several teachers said

that, unlike previous administrators they had, Principal Sawyer immediately fixed problems raised by teachers, such as technology glitches and scheduling issues. Teachers expressed confidence that their voices would be heard in the process of refining and improving intervention time in the future.

- **District support.** The district provided valuable support in the form of the part-time reading consultant as well as support and encouragement around EES’s literacy model. The reading consultant provided valuable expertise that guided many of the instructional decisions. She advised Principal Sawyer and provided teachers with direct training and support regarding small-group reading instruction and how to match instructional strategies to students’ skill deficits. Additionally, the fact that the district encouraged its other elementary schools to take on a similar approach to literacy as EES gave Principal Sawyer and her staff the confidence to continue their approach.
- **Principal Sawyer’s buffering against other district initiatives.** Teachers expressed gratitude that Principal Sawyer protected teachers against other district initiatives by allowing them to focus on their intervention time initiative without having to take on initiatives that might have been conflicting. This was an intentional effort on her part:

One of the things I said to the rest of the district leaders is that I feel like I have [to] insulate my staff from all of the initiatives that come from the district. We have to see how the things that we’re being mandated to do fit within our plan because I know that no one is going to be committed to the plan if they think it’s going to change soon. Things come and go with the wind.

- **Guidance of NISL coach.** Principal Sawyer believed that her NISL coach added value to her ALP implementation beyond the NISL courses alone. Her coach brought a fresh perspective to issues that might otherwise have been challenging to discuss within the district. Principal Sawyer felt that her NISL

EDP Core Concept

One of the most important and fundamental responsibilities of a school leader is to build a positive school culture. Positive school cultures are those in which teachers feel that they matter, what they do matters, they are respected and valued, their contributions are honored, their hard work is rewarded, their achievements are celebrated, and efforts they make to get better at what they do will be noticed and welcomed.

coach was able to provide strategic and helpful advice about ALP implementation because, as an outsider, she was not as emotionally invested or entrenched in the school and district's issues.

Challenges Hindering Change

The following factors presented challenges to Principal Sawyer's ALP implementation:

- **Influx of new students.** The approximately 100 new students who came to EES at the beginning of the 2017–2018 school year hindered ALP implementation in several ways. Testing and grouping the new students into intervention groups slowed the start of intervention time for the year. The new students also resulted in larger intervention groups for teachers, because the school only gained one new staff member to accommodate them. Principal Sawyer acknowledged that some of the PD she had planned related to reading instruction did not materialize because of these extra demands.
- **Pace of change in the district.** Although Principal Sawyer has been successful in protecting intervention time thus far and despite apparent district support, some teachers expressed concern that changes in district priorities may result in the intervention period disappearing in the near future. Teachers said that change in the district was common. Principal Sawyer shared these concerns, adding that there was uncertainty over whether she and her AP would remain in their roles the following school year as a result of budget cuts and district reshuffling.

Conclusion

Principal Sawyer's trajectory for school improvement was built on a solid foundation of trust and positive school culture, allowing her to move quickly to focus on instructional improvement. Before beginning her ALP, she had devoted her first year as a principal at EES to developing relationships with teachers and listening to their ideas and concerns. These efforts contributed to a positive climate in which teachers felt valued and motivated to engage in her subsequent improvement effort related to small-group reading instruction. Principal Sawyer focused on processes for teacher learning related to small-group reading instruction in the first year of ALP implementation through schoolwide PD sessions and grade-level team meetings. Through these opportunities, teachers arrived at a standardized vision for effective small-group reading instruction, which included good phonics instruction, opportunities for students to read on their own, and the use of decodable texts. Principal Sawyer also increased transparency related to reading instruction by introducing protocols for regular reviews of students' progress-monitoring data, for teacher observations, and for teachers sharing their best practices. Instructional transparency helped show how small-group reading instruction could be continually strengthened, which drove Principal Sawyer's efforts in her second year of ALP implementation. Teachers focused on refining small-group reading instruction as well as the alignment between phonics curriculum and small-group reading time in Year 2. Throughout her improvement effort, Principal Sawyer distributed leadership to her AP, the instructional coach, and a reading consultant, all of whom offered valuable expertise. Overall, this effort increased teacher capacity for small-group reading instruction and accelerated students' reading growth.



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