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Research Brief II

Aiming High: Leadership for District-wide Instructional Improvement

Center for Educational Leadership
and Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District

Findings from a one-year case study



UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
College of Education

LEADERSHIP FOR INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT

What's the difference between knowing how to read the words on a page, and knowing what the words mean? It's the difference between school success and failure. With fewer than a third of its students achieving reading proficiency on state tests, Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District made a commitment in November 2003 to change that record to 90% proficient by focusing on improving instruction in the area of literacy. The school board, district leadership, and teachers' union representatives set a fast-track timeline of 2007 to accomplish their goal, and initiated a carefully planned, coherent, phased-in reform that included a partnership with the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL).

In the effort to seek out "the best resources that...we're able to find in the country," district leaders supported CEL's focus on instructional leadership, connecting new learning to classroom practice, and ensuring that district policies, practices and structures support powerful instruction.

After two years of partnership, student test scores and commentary from district leaders, literacy coaches, and teachers all point to changes in how students view reading. "I knew my students were learning because they were constantly talking about what they were doing in their head...They were able to tell you what the big ideas in text were, they were able to tell you what the theme was and use evidence to support their thinking...In the beginning, my kids all thought that reading is just something you do. That you just read the words on the page, that's it."

An examination of the theory of action of the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) and research regarding its work in partnership with school districts is being conducted by the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy at the University of Washington College of Education. This publication, the second in a series to summarize the research, is based on interim findings from a one-year case study by Chrysan Gallucci, Research Director, and Judy Swanson, Research for Quality Schools, and interviews with Stephen Fink, CEL Executive Director.

This publication summarizes findings from research on:

- the nature of the partnership,
- the design of the reform effort,
- early outcomes of the literacy initiative, and
- the impact of the partnership on professional learning.

The nature of the partnership: Critical friends and experts

As its name suggests, Norwalk-La Mirada serves two California communities, one that has consistently been Latino and relatively poor, the other transitioning from what was a primarily middle class, white suburb of Los Angeles to a more diverse community. The 24,000 students in the district are 73% Hispanic/Latino, 15% Caucasian, 4% African American, 4% Asian American, and 3% Filipino, and they attend schools grouped into three "families," organized by high school feeder patterns.

During the 2003-04 school year, the district leadership team took several steps to concentrate its efforts on literacy:

- reorganizing central office leadership to assign responsibility for supervision, instructional leadership, principal evaluation, curriculum, and professional development—along with budget discretion for these functions—to each of three area superintendents (one for each family);
- eliminating the position of Teachers on Special Assignment (TOSA) and creating a job description for literacy coaches who would report directly to the area superintendents;
- establishing the goal of 90% reading proficiency with support from the board and teachers' association; and
- sending a consistent message about the centrality of instruction.

The clear message from the superintendent's office was, "We're going to make instruction the most important thing and everybody else [other central office personnel] is going to figure out how they can help instruction."

The re-organization of central office leadership, the deliberate concentration on messaging, and the decision to create the position of literacy coach were visible outcomes of professional development that district leaders experienced through Leadership Associates, a program funded through the Panasonic Foundation. The nine days of leadership training and support offered through this program along with the consulting and training on literacy provided by CEL secured the three "footings" CEL has identified as critical to improving instruction in a school district:

- helping the whole system get smarter about powerful instruction;
- connecting new learning to classroom practice; and
- ensuring policies, practices and structures support powerful instruction.

"While every footing is of equal weight, and every footing has to be in place," explained CEL Executive Director Stephen Fink, "the specific focus and kind of support within each footing is negotiated in each and every district partnership."

With the decision to partner with CEL for the next two years, the district initiated a centralized reform effort—the first in many years. CEL served as "critical friend," on-the-ground consultant, and teacher. As one district leader noted, "We really needed experts to come in and tell us what were our next steps."

The design of the reform effort: Centralized, focused, and phased

Drawing on CEL's theory of action, the first step was to help district leaders—area superintendents, principals, and literacy coaches—

become more knowledgeable about literacy instruction. An intensive, rigorous "Learning Year" in 2004-05 offered 125 days of consultant time in study group sessions, principal coaching, administrative retreats, and work with literacy coaches.

The level of commitment to learning was reflected in the number of days carved out on the monthly calendar:

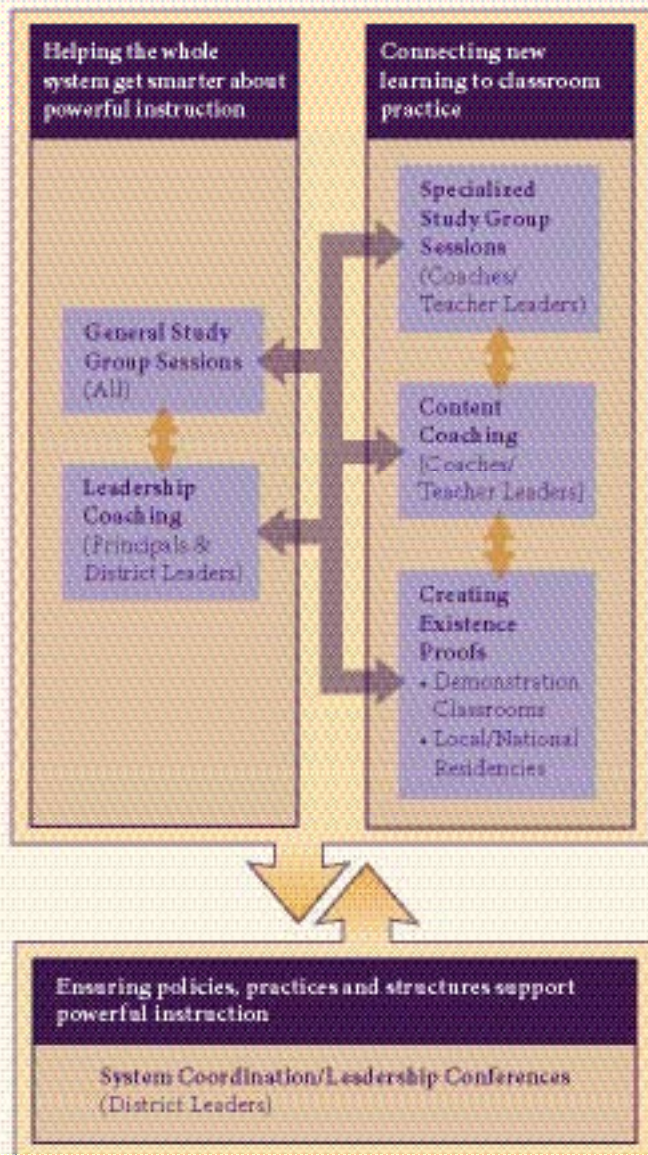
- a full day for the "Good to Great" academy—the district's version of the CEL General Study Group sessions—targeted at district, building, and teacher association leaders, as well as 12 district literacy coaches;
- a full day for area superintendents and literacy coaches at a Coaches' Academy; and
- another day for Cadres held at schools with principals, coaches, and area superintendents, the equivalent of Specialized Study Group Sessions.

The CEL consultant and project director used demonstration lessons to teach "academy" learners specific strategies for reading instruction, including powerful questioning, read-aloud, shared reading, and analysis of text. Literacy coaches received another dose of the same model: planning, demonstrating, and debriefing lessons. The visits to schools initially included walk-throughs in classrooms to observe and analyze instruction, but classroom visits did not end there. In one family of schools, coaches reported "they sometimes did up to eight lessons a day in eight different classrooms." This level of activity helped the coaches build the rapport with teachers that would be needed in the following year.

Reflecting on their learning year, coaches described their experience as "fantastic" and "incredible." In addition to increasing the level of content knowledge of coaches and district leaders, Norwalk-La Mirada used the "go slow" year to "get the word out about upcoming expectations."

Improving Instruction through Content-Focused Leadership

A theory of action, with a focus on pedagogical content and instructional leadership in all phases



Year two of the partnership offered additional reinforcement of the CEL theory of action, with even more time designated for learning and an extension of the initiative to the classroom. The 2005-06 year began with summer school, where literacy coaches honed their skills by teaching some of the district's most challenging students. This experience provided them a boost of confidence in their own skills and gave them more credibility with classroom teachers as they learned what it was like to be "coached" by an expert.

The move to the schools was accomplished with the creation of literacy teams (LIT team) at each school, and the designation of one afternoon each month as a Roll-Out Day for staff development targeted at literacy. The district provided substitutes one day a month so that members of the literacy team could work together, while the staff development work took place on a day when students were dismissed from school early.

This time was used much as it had been in the academy: to view demonstration lessons, discuss what was observed, and develop lesson plans. For the members of the LIT team, the discussion helped "the entire group identify teacher moves that contributed to students' learning." Some of those on the LIT team then opened their classrooms for visits by their colleagues on Roll-Out Days.

In addition to participating in the Good to Great Academy and Cadre meetings, principals had another day to spend with the CEL consultant, project director and guest coaches — asking questions to further their own understanding and planning staff development for the Roll-Out Day.

Researchers heard the same message coming from participants in all of these forums for learning: the importance of observing strong models of instruction, then "trying it on" for themselves—with support from an expert—to learn how to improve.

“I think one of the most powerful things for me is learning by example. . .this is the first chance I had to get deep into my instruction by example, by seeing somebody do it with students.

— LITERACY COACH

Opportunities for professional learning

Learning Environment	Frequency/Content Year I	Frequency/Content Year II
“Good to Great Academy” District leaders All principals District literacy coaches Teachers’ association leadership CEL consultant CEL project director	One day per month Balanced literacy components (e.g., read aloud, shared reading) Powerful instruction Instructional leadership	One day per month Balanced literacy Powerful instruction Teaching to standards Instructional leadership
Coaches’ Academy Area Superintendents District coaches CEL consultant CEL project director	One day per month Balanced literacy Powerful instruction Instructional coaching	One day per month Balanced literacy Powerful instruction Instructional coaching
Principals’ Cadres Area Superintendents District literacy coaches Principals CEL consultant Guest coaches	One day per month Balanced literacy Powerful instruction Instructional coaching	One day per month Classroom observations Giving feedback Establishing leadership voice
Summer School Taught by: District literacy coaches CEL consultant CEL project director		19 days Classroom teaching with support from CEL consultant Using components of balanced literacy, powerful instruction, and assessment
LIT Team Principal 6-12 teachers District literacy coach Area Superintendents (sometimes)		One day per month Balanced literacy Powerful instruction Classroom environment
Roll-Out Days		Two hours per month Balanced literacy Powerful instruction Classroom environment
Principal Forum and Planning Principal Literacy coaches CEL consultant		One day per month AM: Answering questions PM: Professional development planning

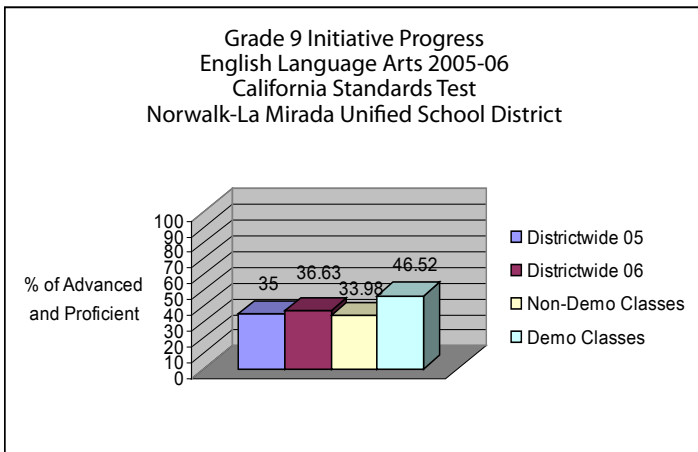
Early outcomes of the initiative: Promising indicators



Over the past two years, English/Language Arts test scores for Norwalk-La Mirada students increased at every grade level. Researchers caution against causal claims that the initiative is responsible for test score gains, but note “the trend is definitely in the right direction.” At the same time, test scores across all grade levels continue to show less

than 50% of students at or above state proficiency levels and that the achievement gap between subgroups (by race or ethnicity, for example) persists.¹

A promising indicator of the initiative’s impact is found in test scores drawn from demonstration classrooms where coaching was provided. Student test scores trended higher in those classrooms compared to scores of students in classrooms without such coaching support.²



California Standards Test (CST) Scores Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District Percentage of students who scored at proficient or above

2003-04 School Year				
Subject	2 nd Grade	4 th Grade	8 th Grade	11 th Grade
English-Language Arts	31%	33%	24%	22%
2004-05 School Year				
Subject	2 nd Grade	4 th Grade	8 th Grade	11 th Grade
English-Language Arts	39%	43%	31%	24%
2005-06 School Year				
Subject	2 nd Grade	4 th Grade	8 th Grade	11 th Grade
English-Language Arts	45%	45%	33%	26%

¹The vast majority of students in Norwalk-La Mirada are Hispanic/Latino students. Disaggregated test score data in Grade 4 (for example) for 2006 shows 40% of Hispanic students at or above proficiency while 78% of Asian students and 61% of White students are at or above proficiency. Similar discrepancies can be found across the past three years for other grade levels.

² It is difficult to attribute these gains completely to the literacy initiative because there is no prior data comparing students in these classrooms.

The impact of the initiative on professional learning: Gains for leaders and coaches, variation among schools

From interviews and informal conversations, researchers documented positive statements “from adults in the district about what they were learning related to instructional leadership and powerful instruction.” Principals felt more comfortable leading the work in instruction with support from a coach. Coaches were grappling with new ideas and concepts, and reporting increases

“I think for the kids, we’ve underestimated them, and I think that’s what I’m learning. Our expectations were so low that we weren’t expecting a lot out of them and they can do a lot more.”

— LITERACY COACH

in their own learning. “I don’t think I ever thought about text the way I think about it now,” explained one coach. “I think I was going through the motions. I really use student data now to inform my instruction.”

There are differences across the district in the degree of change occurring in schools, with high schools lagging behind elementary and middle schools. “Within these levels, there was reportedly wide variation in the degree to which schools were implementing—or trying on—instructional practices such as read aloud and shared reading,” researchers found. While some schools had a mix of strong teacher-leaders and nay-sayers, others were experiencing a cultural shift in teacher practice. As one coach said, “I’m seeing teachers are thinking about their practice a lot more and they’re becoming more open about talking about their practice.”

In the spring of 2005, through its work with Leadership Associates and CEL, the district developed an accountability plan to lay out the expectations for everyone responsible for the literacy initiative. The plan is built on an “if, then” model: If teachers are expected to improve their practice, then what are the expectations for Central Office? Principals? School board? Teachers’ association? The plan was revised in 2006, but continued to spell out responsibilities for leaders, coaches, teachers, the school board, and the teachers’ association. It will be important, researchers concluded, for the district to monitor the accountability plan and develop some means of oversight.

In a district where decision-making has been historically site-based, they note, “it is difficult to begin requiring uniformity. Although central office leaders have developed a number of strategies to focus energies in one direction (e.g., message discipline, district-wide calendars of compulsory professional development, accountability plans), we think that it is as critical to invest in principal instructional leadership capacity as it is to invest in the coaches in order to support local responses to these directives.”

The ongoing research agenda

Ongoing research in Norwalk-La Mirada (CA), Marysville (WA), and Highline (WA) School Districts is focused on these questions:

- How does the participation of district personnel in roles and activities related to instructional-improvement practice change over time?
- What are the critical characteristics and dimensions of the settings that support learning for district personnel, and how are they constructed?
- How do interactions with an external provider shape or guide the district in teaching and learning related to instructional improvement practice?
- In what ways do individual and collective learning among district personnel contribute to what the district as a system learns?

Another commissioned research project is addressing these questions in Norwalk-La Mirada and Marysville:

- What changes occur in leaders’ knowledge and skills, if any, from the partnership’s system-wide efforts to deepen expertise in instructional improvement?
- More specifically, how, if at all, does the district and building leaders’ ability to critically analyze instruction and plan feedback for teachers deepen over time, in the context of a district-wide, grounded intervention focused on improving these abilities?

9709 3rd Avenue NE
Suite 306
Seattle, WA 98115
Campus Mailbox: #358731

P: 206.221.6881
F: 206.221.6774
edlead@u.washington.edu
www.k-12leadership.org



UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
College of Education