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Research Brief V

Learning at Every Level

Center for Educational Leadership and Marysville School District

A qualitative study of a partnership to improve instruction

CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
College of Education

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 fifth in a series to summarize the research, is based on findings from a two-year case study by Judy Swanson, Research for Quality Schools, with Dan Lysne, Michelle Van Lare, and Irene Yoon, University of Washington. Except where noted otherwise, quotations can be attributed to the researcher.

How can you help teachers improve their instruction when they spend most of the day in their own classrooms? Get them out of the classroom. How can you help principals play a bigger role in supporting that improvement? Get them into the classroom.

Marysville (WA) School District took these steps—and several others—to improve instruction by making good teaching visible to teachers, principals, and district administrators. Guided by research findings[1] that new practices will never be fully implemented if educators don't have the opportunity to see them and try them out for themselves, the district partnered with the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) to create experiences so profound that teachers who had been on strike three years earlier began to ask, "Can I go? I'd like to attend the training." As anyone who has attended a professional development program can attest, changing practice requires more than just seeing an expert in action. This publication describes the intersecting opportunities that Marysville leaders and CEL consultants put in place in 2005-06 and 2006-07 to help teachers improve their skills, help principals support teachers as they tried new strategies, and help district leaders model the changes they wanted to see. In short, this is a synopsis of research about learning at every level.

A new commitment to quality instruction

Marysville's superintendent had worked with CEL in another district prior to assuming his position in 2004 and brought with him a commitment to focus on quality instruction, beginning with literacy. He put together a leadership team with the same commitment and worked to develop capacity within the district by introducing principals and elementary literacy coaches to the structures for independent reading, including mini-lessons and classroom libraries, that would spark student interest in books. This effort revealed an orientation on the part of the superintendent and district leaders to modeling learning, using a concept of "gradual release." First, presenters model how to teach a new concept, strategy, or process. Next, they gradually release some part of the work to the learners—district leaders, building principals, coaches, or teachers—while offering some pre-determined level of guidance. Finally, the participants apply what they've learned, either by themselves or in the case of teachers, as a grade-level team or department.

The concept of gradual release of responsibility is not limited to adult learning in Marysville, but is also applied in classrooms. Initially the teacher does most of the work in teaching new reading skills, for example, but over time the teacher releases the responsibility to the student to read independently.

Coaching and feedback: essential ingredients for application of learning

What's the likelihood that teachers sitting in a presentation will take back what they've learned and try it out in the classroom? About 85% of those listening will understand what they're heard, 15% will attain the skills, but only 10% will try to apply that learning in the classroom, according to research by Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers. With the option to practice, skill attainment goes up to 80%, but only 15% of teachers will apply their learning. If teachers are coached and receive feedback, understanding of the concept and skill attainment increases to 90%, and 80% of teachers can apply their learning.

[1] Joyce, B. and Showers, B. (1982). "The coaching of teaching." *Educational Leadership*, 40 (1), 4-10.

Year I: Professional development "to bring everyone along"

CEL consultants worked with the district to introduce a variety of ways for leaders, coaches, and teachers to learn the components of balanced literacy, observe powerful instruction, coach and be coached, and share observations and insights. The researchers observed, "Support structures and new practices were introduced at multiple levels of the district simultaneously to bring everyone along."

Summer school in Marysville provided the opportunity for 50 teachers including seven literacy coaches to be "immersed in the literacy work" —team-teaching to promote both teacher learning and student learning, observing a CEL consultant model new teaching approaches, and then practicing the skills they had learned. Two afternoons each week, the consultant "modeled sophisticated practices, masterfully weaving together a number of strategies," and challenging the teachers and literacy coaches to "create meaning for the kids." At the end of summer school, the district had 50 "ambassadors" for the literacy initiative, as one administrator explained:

> *The immersion of summer school was just huge from the standpoint of having 50 people who went back to the building just pumped, enthused, excited, energized and saying, 'We can do this work.' It built a good beachhead in each building."*

Instructional practice seminars brought together a host of learners from across the district (see Table 1, page 6) one day each month, including those teachers who had both taught and learned in summer school, signaling a culture change in the district. "It was a completely new experience for teachers to be part of a collaborative team with administrators," the researchers found, and to learn that "whatever they ask of us, they ask of themselves first." The superintendent set the expectation that what they learned would be used to bring colleagues at the school sites on board. This task was made easier given that "the exceptional quality of the training energized everyone" and "careful planning among the project director, the CEL instructor, and district leaders helped them tailor training to what schools needed."

In addition to modeling "the big ideas" of balanced literacy, CEL consultants led discussions on instructional leadership, sometimes partnering with district leaders, other times handing the reins to district leaders to present.

In assessing what they had taken away from these sessions, participants identified three themes:

- an "instructional triangle" that served as a reminder to focus on three aspects of instruction: student needs, purpose, and selecting appropriate text,
- district leadership in providing quality professional development, and
- the impact of this model of professional learning on changing the culture of district.

> *"It was a completely new experience for teachers to be part of a collaborative team with administrators."*
>
> — RESEARCHERS

Classroom walk-throughs occurred two-three mornings a week as district leaders and literacy coaches joined principals in observing classrooms to see "how effective they (themselves) had been in teaching new skills" in the instructional practice seminars. This practice set the expectation for continuous improvement, as one principal noted: "Just the fact that they're showing up in my office is huge accountability."

District leaders made clear these observations were not evaluations of teacher performance, and built a level of trust with teachers that was essential to trying out new practices. A coach described the development of trust this way:

> *I think the district has helped us grow trust in our building….I have even heard teachers say, 'Okay, what is my next step, what can I do different?'….So I think the view of the whole walk-through process has changed, and that is because we have created together a learning community. I truly believe this has happened from the district administration all the way down.*

To close the feedback loop, what they learned was used to inform the next round of instructional practice seminars and next steps for building principals' work.

Training for coaches in Year 1 offered opportunities for the district literacy coach and the building literacy coaches to develop their understanding of balanced literacy and the conditions required to support instruction, with a clear expectation that they were to practice what they were learning and be willing to demonstrate their learning. Their responsibilities also included working with principals and leadership teams in the schools to plan the school's professional development. "The training that coaches valued most," the researchers reported, "was their own day with the CEL consultant when they learned how to coach. These days were also filled with additional content as building expertise was critical for them to become effective in their role. In essence, coaches could see where the work was heading and given time to learn in depth the topics they would be expected to lead in the future."

At mid-year, coaches were divided into triads and took turns experiencing three different roles: demonstrating a lesson, recording observations as a scribe, and coaching the teacher (providing feedback).

Waiver days were new to Marysville, reflecting the willingness of Washington State to waive the requirement of 180 days of student attendance if those student-free days are used for school improvement. District leaders negotiated with the teachers association to use a portion of these five additional days to help teachers learn about powerful instruction. "Valiant" efforts on the part of the building teams produced mixed results. Some schools generated information overload by squeezing in too much information in a short amount of time. Others created so much excitement that school staffs looked for additional time in the schedule to learn, while still others found their overzealous staff members needed to focus and start small to avoid being overloaded.

Observing that principals needed more support to lead these efforts, district leaders designed two more opportunities for learning: principal triads and instructional leadership sessions.

Principal triads—groups that included three-four principals, a district leader, and an occasional literacy coach—were led by two CEL consultants, one who coached elementary principals, another who worked with secondary principals. Initially the groups observed the consultant, but over time, the consultants "released"

Table 1. Supports for Learning

Learning Environment	Participants	Content	Frequency	Typical Activities
Summer School	Literacy coaches Teachers Principals CEL consultants	Balanced literacy Powerful instruction	Professional development two days per week for six weeks	Demonstrations by consultants Opportunity to practice approaches learned with support on a daily basis
Instructional Practice Seminars	District leaders (superintendent, assistant superintendents, directors) All principals District and building literacy coaches Teacher leaders (two-four per school) CEL consultant CEL project director	Balanced literacy components (read aloud, shared reading, independent reading) Foundations of literacy Powerful instruction Instructional leadership	One day per month	Large group presentation by CEL consultant Small group discussions Demonstrations with Marysville students Analysis of videotaped lessons Planning for professional development at schools
Walk-throughs	District leaders Principals CEL consultants (occasionally) Literacy coaches	Balanced literacy Powerful instruction	Two-three days each week	Look for evidence of literacy practices, powerful instruction, impact of coaching
Coach Training	District literacy coach Building literacy coaches Some district leaders CEL consultant CEL project director	Balanced literacy Literacy foundations (book leveling, conferring, assessment) Instructional coaching Professional literature	One day per month	Whole group work with CEL consultant: demonstration lessons with students or side-by-side with coaches Peer observations of coaching

> *"Then I can feel, if I flub it up, it's going to be okay. Actually, you are not flubbing it up, you are learning and that made it okay."*
>
> — PRINCIPAL

Table 1. Supports for Learning (continued)

Learning Environment	Participants	Content	Frequency	Typical Activities
District Coach Meetings/ Training	Literacy coaches District coaches Assistant superintendent	Balanced literacy Literacy foundations (book leveling, conferring, assessment) Instructional coaching Professional literature	One half-day per month (between CEL coach training)	Whole group and small group work Sharing ideas and concerns
School-based Professional Development **Waiver Days**	Principal and school leadership team Literacy coach Whole school staff District leaders (periodically) CEL project director (occasionally)	Balanced literacy Powerful instruction (determined by building)	Nine half-days per year, four before school starts	Varies by school, often components from instructional practice sessions—whole group, small group, watch videos, and debrief
Principal Triads	CEL consultant District leaders Principals (three-four) Literacy coach (occasionally)	Balanced literacy Powerful instruction Leadership of the literacy initiative in the schools	Three days per year	Walk-throughs Classroom observations with debrief Discussions with CEL consultant Discussions with colleagues
District/ Principal Instructional Leadership	Superintendent Assistant superintendent Directors Principals	Instructional leadership	One day per month	Instructional memos Leadership voice Professional development planning Creating and supporting building focus

responsibility to the group members, who then took the lead in setting the purpose, describing the classrooms they would visit, and debriefing what they saw. Principals found these discussions "expanded their perspectives" and attributed much of the success of the triad to the consultant and the opportunity to learn from colleagues.

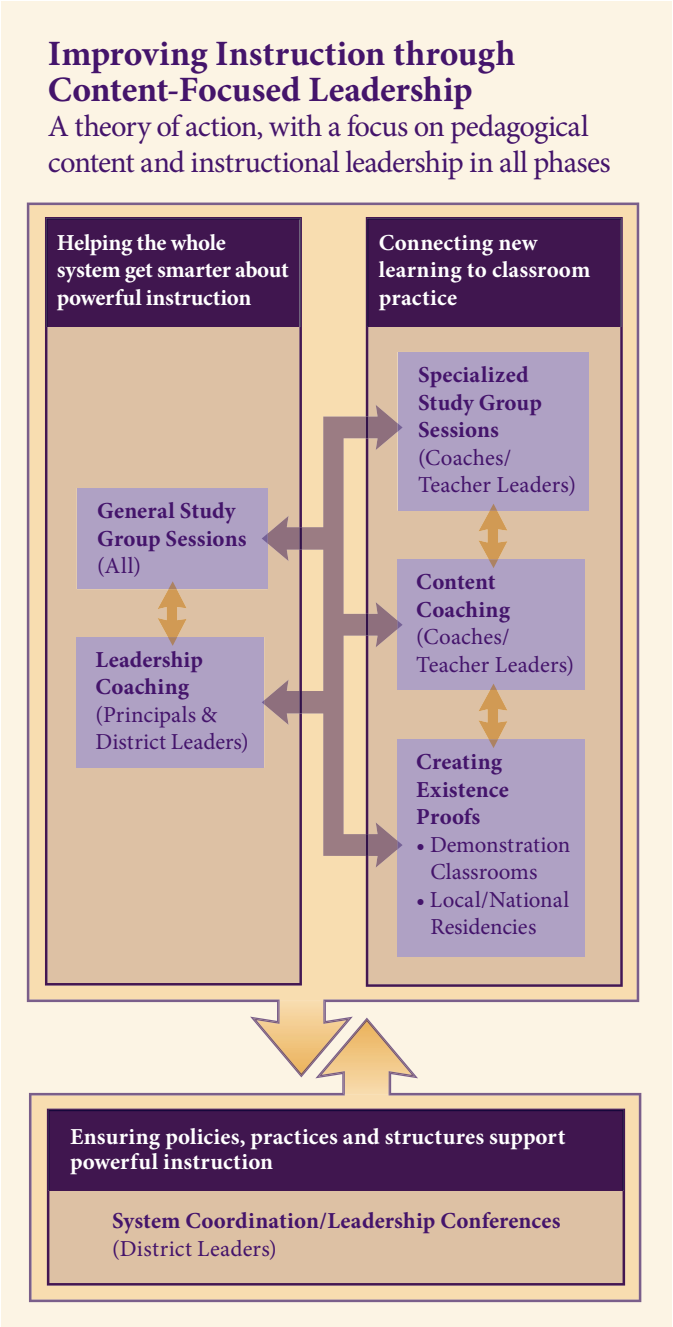
> *She's good at making sure we are challenging ourselves. She'll make sure that we're going to extend it a little bit more without overdoing it, without killing the teachers, and expecting too much…She's also been very good just with organizing our ideas on what we can do with professional development on our next waiver day. She can look at the whole picture and help us come up with next steps. And she listens intently. She understands everything you say.*

District/principal instructional leadership offered an additional half-day a month for administrators to focus on how to lead the improvement process. These sessions were used to develop skills in writing memos to staff about instruction, planning professional development, and developing leadership voice. One district leader described the importance of instructional memos this way:

> *By doing the instructional memos, you're being very clear and explicit about what it is we're about and where we're headed. I think that sometimes we assume people know what we're doing. This is the way to really get it down on paper as a combination planning tool, a communication tool and also a reflection tool. I think for principals it really is an opportunity for them to reflect.*

The design challenge was to give both veterans and new principals what they needed when they needed it.

Figure 1. CEL Theory of Action



Year 2: Building teacher expertise

In Year 2, Marysville expanded on the professional learning structures created in the prior year by adding studio classroom demonstration sites and focusing resources on a particular goal set by each school.

Studio sessions allowed "teachers to have the opportunity to see over and over expert instruction and learn side-by-side with consultants in their own classrooms," with the expectation that they would incorporate what they saw in their own practice.

The idea of studio sessions originated in summer school when a few teachers volunteered their classrooms as demonstration sites. Using the concept of gradual release, consultants initially taught lessons while teachers observed, followed by teaming with teachers and finally coaching teachers side-by-side. "Teachers found the experience so valuable that they asked district leaders to continue the practice during the school year."

The question then became not whether to continue studio classrooms, but how to invest resources: heavily in a few schools or spread across all schools? The decision was to invest equally across the district. Each school was allocated three days with a CEL consultant.

Building focus. The schools were challenged to focus all of their professional development resources—including studio classrooms—on a particular goal. At the leadership retreat prior to the start of school, principals were to define that goal by using a decision-making process to "reflect on results" and determine where teachers were in their skill development. Using answers from that reflection, they would then identify the purpose of the next round of work—what should teachers know and be able to do—decide what instructional approach would get them there, and what evidence would suffice to know they had succeeded.

Consulting with district leaders, principals identified which classrooms would serve as studio classrooms, and which teachers would be released from class to observe during studio days. The work "looked different in each of the schools, depending on the clarity of the school goal, how the school leaders aligned the studio work to support that goal, and the support the school was able to provide between studio days to maintain the continuity and focus of their work." In some schools, for example, coaches were able to support teachers between the consultant's visits.

Schools struggled initially in defining a single goal. Some principals chose such all-encompassing goals they didn't know where to start. Some ended up with a goal too late in the year and had only one waiver day left to teach skills that would accomplish the goal. Each school continued to clarify the goal focus over the course of the year.

Assessing the value of the partnership

The CEL-Marysville collaboration, the researchers concluded, embodies the characteristics of partnership: working together for a single purpose and sharing mutual respect. The success of the partnership can be attributed to several factors:

- An understanding of how people learn and how lasting change happens
- A superintendent who drives reform by modeling learning. "You know that what he is trying to model in his professional development to us is what he would expect us to try to do. And what is good about it, he makes mistakes and is open about it. . .Then I can feel, if I flub it up, it's going to be okay. Actually, you are not flubbing it up, you are learning and that made it okay." - Principal

- District leaders with strong knowledge of leadership, professional development, and literacy
- CEL expertise in instruction, particularly literacy, and in coaching instructional leadership. "I think what they provide is a tremendous amount of expertise, very honest feedback—they say the things that need to be said, and also build the relationship at the same time. So I think they have the permission to really speak honestly. And they ask great questions about the work." - District leader
- Quality professional development that was supported by the teachers association, with the result that more teachers embraced the work. The researchers found "teachers feel like they are treated as professionals, and are given the tools and support to do the job that's asked of them."

The district and CEL created the literacy initiative together by "thinking through" how to structure professional development and ongoing support. If district leaders, principals and coaches were intimidated initially by hard questions from consultants, they grew to appreciate "their directness and insights." For their part, teachers are more comfortable with walk-throughs and asking for feedback.

The investment is increasing expertise within district, the researchers find. While it is too early to assess the impact of improved instruction with test scores, teachers believe that students know more and can do more.

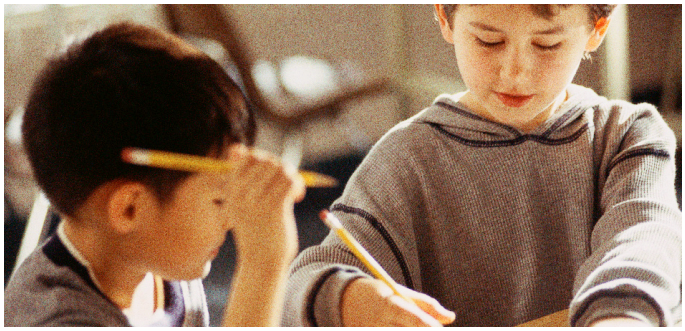
In the absence of specific procedures to develop what the district hoped would be communities of practice, there are spontaneous developments: principal triads are meeting on their own and coaches are meeting informally.

The year ahead

Principals are to design a year-long plan for professional development, not just submit plans as they did in 2006-07, for the use of the days prior to school. Principal job descriptions have been modified to attract candidates vested in instructional leadership. To add coaching support for math, the number of literacy coaches has been reduced to six, but all of their time will be spent coaching and developing their own skills, without the diversion of other duties such as testing and playground supervision.

District leaders are aware they will need to increase accountability and target resources "to achieve their goal of having 80 percent of staff in each building engaged in improving practice." The superintendent described the district's plan to date as an intentional effort to "be high on the support side and low on the compliance side," and added, "Now, we don't want it to flip, but we do want to be far more intentional, a little support, a little expectation, a little more support, a little bit more expectation…"

This approach may help them achieve their ultimate goal, as one administrator put it: "to build and sustain that capacity so much so, that when the original leaders leave, the work stays….that has always been our goal—to figure out how we grow our own."



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