



“Outstanding alignment” in rural Wyoming district leads to stair-step improvement in student outcomes



The Challenge

In 2010, when Jay Harnack became the superintendent of Sublette County School District #1 in Pinedale, Wyoming, one of his first mandates was to pick a new teacher evaluation system. Harnack knew little about McREL, but after studying his options, he chose McREL's system for both teacher and principal evaluations.

Harnack says he was impressed with the research on which the systems are based—and research-based practices were just what his rural, geographically isolated district needed. As an administrator back in his home state of Illinois, Harnack had made decisions based partially on “what other districts were doing,” meeting often with superintendents from nearby districts to share ideas and collaborate. But in his new district, which covers a land mass about the size of Delaware and Rhode Island put together, Harnack didn't have those opportunities.

What he did have was a district that was growing and changing demographically due to a booming natural gas industry, leading to high mobility among students and teachers, and declining academic performance. Fortunately, he also had a school board that had a vision of excellence and gave Harnack the authority to, he says, “go make us better.”

Strategic Solution

Once the district began training on the new evaluation systems, it quickly became clear that additional training was needed. “They were the best systems available,” said Harnack. “But it wasn't fair to evaluate staff on leadership and instructional practices they weren't familiar with”—specifically, strategies and practices from McREL's Balanced Leadership and Classroom Instruction That Works (CITW) research and programs.

Thus began a domino effect of professional development. Although Harnack admits they took on too much at once, he could see how all of the pieces aligned and built on each other. In the past five years, in addition to Balanced Leadership and CITW, they have also received training in District Leadership That Works, Power Walkthrough, and Using CITW with Technology. Now, he says, their alignment is outstanding. “You can draw a line from our strategic plan all the way down to classroom practices.” The line even extends to Harnack's own evaluations by his board, with whom he meets once a month to receive formative feedback on his performance.

A tremendously powerful part of the process is training not only administrators but also cohorts of teachers who are aspiring leaders. “Teachers have gotten a great understanding of the decision-making process and what the principals are trying to accomplish and why,” he said. Now, he adds, when these teachers go back to their grade-level teams and see resistance to an initiative, they can say, “No, wait, it's not what you think. This is why they're doing it.”

Their goal is to train the entire teaching staff in Balanced Leadership. “You can't believe the richness of conversations teachers have now,” Harnack said. “They understand what effective leadership is and how best to support their principal.”

Results

Since 2010, student achievement has steadily grown. Assessment results on MAPS (Measures of Academic Progress), PAWS (Proficiency Assessments for Wyoming Students), and ACT are “like a set of stairs,” Harnack says. For example, the average ACT score has risen every year, from 19.4 in 2010 to 21.9 in 2013—increases he attributes to the work his district has done with McREL.

“Balanced Leadership has become our culture,” he explained. “If I were to hire a new principal today, I would send them for the training before they ever worked a day.”

Recently, the district had an external review by the accrediting organization for Wyoming schools, and, based on five categories of standards, Sublette County School District #1 received the highest score in the state of Wyoming, which was on par with the best scores nationwide.

Next Steps

Harnack has finished training the last Balanced Leadership cohort, and he and his staff are working hard to maintain the improvements that have been made.

“There's so much white noise out there about everything other than what needs to be done, it's easy to lose track,” he said. “But we have found what works for our district. Our test scores show, when implemented with fidelity, aligned, research-based practices lead to improvement—not in my elementary school, not in my middle school, not in my high school, but in *all three*, almost in lockstep. You can't beat that.”