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AWSM program improves formative assessment with authentic samples of student work

The Challenge

In recent years, Colorado Springs District 11 in southern Colorado has focused on improving teacher practices and on formative assessment approaches, specifically depth of knowledge. Because teachers receive little support to guide implementation of formative assessment during their pre-service programs, District 11 was looking for professional development programs to help meet this need. In 2009, McREL approached District 11 with an opportunity to take part in the development and piloting of a new mathematics formative assessment program, the Assessment Work Sample Method (AWSM)—a way to collect, create, discuss, and learn from authentic samples of student work.

Strategic Solution

AWSM professional development sessions engaged middle school mathematics teachers with the process of formative assessment and helped them develop and use high-quality formative assessment in their classrooms. At the beginning of the 2012–2013 school year, pilot teachers completed a pretest of mathematics content knowledge and an assessment work sample. As the year continued, McREL facilitators led AWSM professional development sessions that were focused on actual student and teacher work to help teachers develop a deep and practical understanding of and ability to use formative assessment in mathematics.

Results

At the end of the 2012–2013 school year, McREL compiled data from the assessment practice findings, pre- and post-student work samples, professional development session observations, participant surveys, and participant focus groups. Results indicated that the AWSM professional development significantly improved teacher practice of formative assessment by the end of the school year.

In addition, AWSM enhanced teachers' classroom practice in four areas: planning for formative assessment, implementing formative assessment, using formative assessment to inform responsive instruction, and involving students in formative assessment.

Teachers also reported four specific formative assessment strategies that they implemented between AWSM sessions: 1) using a non-graded quiz, 2) providing descriptive feedback to students, 3) assessing students while they worked in class to provide immediate oral feedback, and 4) clearly communicating learning goals and success criteria to students. One participating teacher said, "AWSM has helped me realize that differentiation is crucial. It helps me look for the outliers in my classes—the ones who are overachieving and the ones that are falling behind. I already knew about formative assessment, but AWSM has brought it into focus."

Next Steps

Six additional schools are participating in the field test for the 2013–2014 school year. An introductory session for teachers was held in August 2013, and McREL facilitators are co-leading AWSM sessions throughout the school year with a District 11 mathematics coach. A Participant Guide that provides primary resources, tools, and references for AWSM professional development was developed throughout 2012–2013 and revised for this school year, based on feedback from participant surveys, facilitator debriefs, and focus groups. McREL and district facilitators are also using the Facilitator Guide, which includes session materials from the Participant Guide with additional resources to support implementing the sessions. By the end of the project in August 2014, a professional development program with empirical data about its promise for improving teacher practice and increasing student achievement in mathematics will be fully developed.

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