



SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT | SUCCESS STORY

A rural region of central Arizona finds success with a train-the-trainers approach to professional development

Yavapai County Education Service Agency



Serves 24 school districts in rural central Arizona



Provides professional development services for educators across region



Member districts enroll 25,000 students, combined

Services McREL provided:



Balanced Leadership® training



Classroom Instruction That Works® training



Facilitator training in both, so the county can maintain momentum economically

Results: High impact at low cost

- Increased understanding of specific leadership practices that impact student achievement
- Increased ability to put new leadership knowledge into action, using appropriate tools and activities to effectively lead change
- Increased knowledge and ability to focus on the right issues and responsibilities to lead more effectively

“We have been able to meet the needs of small, rural educational systems by expanding McREL trainings to central office, school teams, teachers, and board members.”

— Nancy Alexander, Yavapai County professional development consultant and McREL authorized facilitator



McREL helps rural region achieve sustainable, affordable professional development



The Challenge

Professional development (PD) never seems to make the top of rural school budgets. But that's what educators in Yavapai County, Arizona, clamored for. All students deserve teachers and school leaders who are committed to lifelong improvement. Could Yavapai make it happen?

Strategic Solution

In 2010 the education service agency (ESA) serving sparsely populated Yavapai County (211,000 residents, 24 school districts, 26 charters) challenged itself to craft an affordable, durable PD strategy.

"We all want to serve the needs of our kids, but without a plan, it's just sort of a hope and a prayer," recalled Nancy Alexander, a Yavapai County PD consultant. "You can have a focus, but what if it's the wrong focus? What if a school concentrates on reading but already has good reading results and really needs math improvement?"

At a series of brainstorming sessions, educators from across the county articulated their goals—and how much more attainable they'd be with PD. "Having them all in the same space at the same time really was impacting," recalls Mel Sussman, the McREL consultant who led those initial sessions.

One participant, Karin Ward, superintendent of the Beaver Creek district and then-principal of its only school, realized she could use help with a change she had in mind: a four-day school week.

"I was concerned about teacher retention. Going to the bank, the grocery store—all of those are 20–30 minutes away. I saw a lot of ragged, exhausted teachers, and I knew that if we were to keep them, we needed a better plan," she said.

Using McREL's Balanced Leadership to walk her staff through a change management process, Ward gained such thorough consensus that the school board was won over in a single meeting: "Instead of asking us, 'Have you thought about this, have you thought about this,' they could see we already had."

Joe Howard, superintendent of the larger Prescott Unified district, tells a similar story about using Balanced Leadership to involve teachers in a board presentation on reprogramming schools following Great Recession funding losses.

"Our teachers presented what they wanted the curriculum to look like. It's the first time that happened without any involvement by administrators. It's not often the board has no questions, but there was nothing left to ask. The right people were the ones making the decisions," he said.

"We've been through some tough stuff and we had to come out of that with a new, collaborative attitude," Howard continued. "The community felt like we'd been working in a vacuum, and then we said, 'We need your help.' That's where Balanced Leadership really helped: what questions do you ask, how do you build collective efficacy, not just with your staff but with your community?"

While spreading the word about Balanced Leadership, the ESA also introduced McREL's Classroom Instruction That Works (CITW) framework to teachers. Katrina Sacco, Beaver Creek School's new principal, said CITW improves staff communication.

"We use CITW to drill down on a few topics—for example, adding nonlinguistic elements to note-taking, which has been helpful for our younger children and those with special needs. If I had to choose topics out of the wide world of education research, it would be much more labor intensive."

Results

Professional development "has become part of our culture in this area," said Principal Sacco, thanks to the train-the-trainers approach adopted by McREL and the Yavapai ESA.

"That's the real joy of what we've done here," added McREL consultant Sussman. "We've impacted so many districts. We don't go in to do a one-and-done. Our goal is to open a wide variety of channels for them to explore."

Next Steps

As of this writing, four Yavapai County educators, including Nancy Alexander, have become authorized McREL facilitators, and they plan to continue introducing colleagues to Balanced Leadership and Classroom Instruction That Works indefinitely.

"We have been able to meet the needs of small, rural educational systems by expanding McREL trainings to central office, school teams, teachers, and board members," she said.

