



SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT | SUCCESS STORY

photo courtesy of District #197

Strengthening leadership and instruction in Minnesota district leads to academic gains

School District #197 Suburban Minneapolis-St.Paul



Students: ~5,000

White: 55% Hispanic: 27%

African-American: 8%






Asian: 5% Multi-racial: 5%

Native American/Pacific Islander: 1%



Eligible for free or reduced-price meals: 41%

Partnered with McREL to:

-  Develop and enhance school leaders' skills and efficacy
-  Implement effective staff evaluation frameworks and processes
-  Use high-quality instructional practices more consistently
-  Create a common framework and vocabulary for school improvement efforts
-  Establish a culture of change and continuous improvement efforts

Result: Districtwide increases in student achievement



“Since we started working with McREL, we have achieved organizational improvements across multiple indicators. Implementing a common framework around school improvement has made a big difference—and schools that do so with fidelity and follow-through have seen consistent gains.”

- Dr. Nancy Allen-Mastro, Superintendent



Developing a common language and framework for improvement helps leaders and teachers flourish



The Challenge

In 2011, the Minnesota Legislature began requiring districts in the state to establish formal principal evaluation systems, designed to enhance the ability of principals to improve their schools' professional environment and performance, including student achievement and teacher effectiveness. These systems are required to include multiple criteria—for example, they must align to a principal's job description and district goals, include on-the-job-observations, and incorporate longitudinal data on student academic growth—in order to provide a full picture of performance.

And that's when School District 197, which serves 5,000 students on the south side of Minneapolis-St. Paul, discovered McREL's Balanced Leadership research-based principal evaluation system and leadership development program, and began to work with McREL to incorporate both into a comprehensive approach to improvement.

Strategic Solution

In 2013, District 197 began training staff on Balanced Leadership, which brings together decades of research on effective leadership to pinpoint practices that are linked to improved student achievement. That work, says Superintendent Dr. Nancy Allen-Mastro, "gave us a common vocabulary, and we embraced it as our leadership framework and philosophy." Now, principals, associate principals, curriculum and special program staff, and other district leaders are all trained in the Balanced Leadership model, providing a common point of reference around the leadership skills and practices that the district values. This shared framework is also linked to the district's continuous improvement model: When buildings develop their improvement plans, at least one goal must be articulated through the Balanced Leadership lens.

At the classroom level, District 197 worked with McREL to provide its teachers with high-quality professional learning on effective, research-based instructional strategies and practices, using McREL's Classroom Instruction That Works. McREL also helped the district create robust internal capacity to sustain their initiative over the long-term by developing a cadre of expert district staff who could provide teachers with additional professional learning and coaching opportunities throughout the school year.

Results

Implementing a common framework around school improvement has made a big difference, according to Dr. Allen-Mastro, because "our leaders instantly know what it means, for example, to create demand around an initiative or identify agreed-upon outcomes—and why it's important." Using the Balanced Leadership framework, she notes, has made improvement planning more robust and more intentional, from preliminary goal setting through evaluation, the common framework supports continual dialogue and follow-through.

Dr. Allen-Mastro says that schools with high-fidelity implementation and follow-through have seen the most consistent gains from year to year in student achievement, sometimes in the double digits. "The better the plan, and the truer the leader stays to the plan, the better the outcome," she said. "Seriousness around planning and follow-through has been a game-changer."

Over the past four years, districtwide science achievement has risen by 3.6%, reading by 4.5%, and math by 7.6%. Dr. Allen-Mastro notes that these gains are part of a larger effort, which includes their consultation and training with McREL.

Next Steps

The district plans to continue training new teachers on McREL's instructional strategies, and anticipates that all staff will be trained on all strategies by the fall of 2018, receiving 12–18 total hours of professional learning, including how to use technology with the strategies. The district is also beginning to monitor use of the strategies and practices with McREL's Power Walkthrough classroom observation tool. In addition, the district is continuing to train its new administrators in the common language of McREL's Balanced Leadership framework to help them plan high-impact strategies and engage their leaders and collaborative teacher teams around the work going forward.

Taken together, these initiatives support the district's strong focus on creating a culture of change and continuous improvement.

