



SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT | SUCCESS STORY


Reducing variability leads to achievement gains in large Nebraska district

Lincoln Public Schools

 Students: **40,935**

Teachers: **3,500** 




 Students receiving free or reduced-price lunch: **46%**

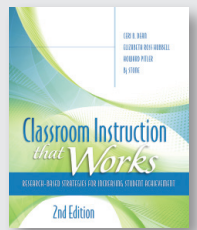
English-language learners: **8.2%** 

Number of languages spoken: **120**

 Ethnic minorities: **33%**

Focused on Creating the Environment for Learning

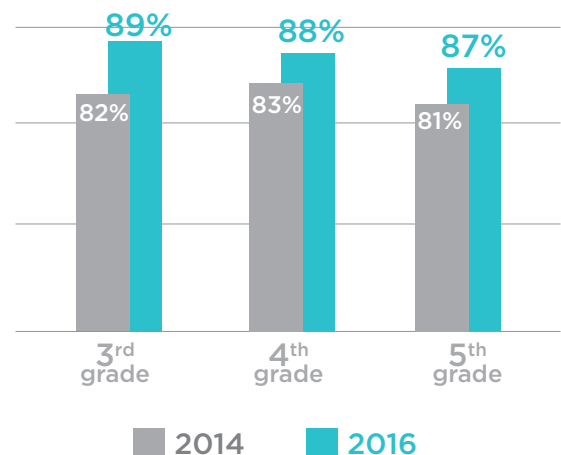
-  Setting Objectives and Providing Feedback
-  Reinforcing Effort and Providing Recognition
-  Cooperative Learning



“With more consistency across classrooms, the quality of instruction and achievement have gone up.”

-SARAH SALEM, DIRECTOR, CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING, LINCOLN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

District reading score increases



Focusing on high-quality instruction for all—and sticking with it



THE CHALLENGE

Providing effective instruction has always been a priority of Lincoln Public Schools (LPS)—and, thanks to supportive leadership, a focus on continuous improvement, and dedicated teachers, the district has generally been successful in doing so. But as the district, already the state’s second-largest, has rapidly become larger and more diverse in recent years, the challenge has become continuing to ensure equitable, high-quality instruction for all students.

With roughly 400 new teachers and 800 new students each year, new buildings popping up to accommodate the growth, and a student population that encompasses 120 languages and 119 countries, LPS was looking for an “instructional backbone” that would provide consistency and support all of the work of the district.

STRATEGIC SOLUTION

LPS found what they were looking for with the research-based instructional strategies of McREL’s *Classroom Instruction That Works* (2nd ed.) (CITW). In the fall of 2013, Dr. Bj Stone, a consulting director at McREL, began delivering CITW professional development to principals and teacher teams across the district, and later expanded to include train-the-trainer sessions for select staff.

While training has included all nine categories of CITW strategies, Stone emphasized what she calls the “entrée” strategies: Setting Objectives and Providing Feedback, Reinforcing Effort and Providing Recognition, and Cooperative Learning. Setting Objectives had the greatest impact, according to Sarah Salem, LPS Director of Continuous Improvement and Professional Learning—especially at the elementary level and for special education students and English-language learners, in particular. “It’s truly remarkable when I go into classrooms and ask students what they are learning, and they immediately look at the objective and can put it in their own words,” she says.

CITW also supports other district work, she adds. Teachers now use CITW language during Professional Learning Community conversations and set their own objectives while working on curriculum and pacing. In addition, CITW aligns with the Tier 1 instruction goals of LPS’ Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and provides concrete examples of what instruction should look like for teacher evaluation.

RESULTS

Achievement in LPS has risen steadily over the last five years and, while a number of factors have contributed to the success, Stone and Salem agree that the decision to commit to instruction and stick with it has played a key part. “Now all teachers and principals, as they go about creating and implementing improvement plans in their schools, know what the focus should be—and that focus is the highest quality instructional practice,” Salem says.

She credits LPS teachers with “rising to the challenge” of being more intentional about giving feedback, setting performance goals, communicating learning objectives with students and parents, and providing engaging instruction. Many teachers come back more than once to CITW sessions, she says, because it’s so practical, and they can implement what they learn the next day. “As one teacher told me, ‘I’m going to give feedback to students anyway, so I may as well do it in a way that will make the biggest difference.’”

NEXT STEPS

With more than 300 teachers participating in three days of CITW training in the fall of 2016, LPS and McREL have begun offering more flexible scheduling to allow teachers to take (or re-take) certain parts of the training. The district has also decided to train instructional coaches, so that they can better support schools as they implement the strategies. Many schools, Salem says, are incorporating the strategies into their school improvement plans and collecting data on their progress.

Having a consistent instructional framework has not only benefited LPS students, but it has also lessened the burden on teachers and staff to continually seek for ways to improve. “In education, we never feel like we’re doing enough, which can lead us to keep bringing in new initiatives that we think will make a difference,” Salem says. But by keeping the focus on one thing, the CITW strategies “are no longer an initiative to learn, but instead just the way instruction looks.”