



McREL helps Central Valley connect the dots



The Challenge

Central Valley School District in Spokane Valley, Wash., with a student population of about 12,600, serves the city of Spokane Valley and surrounding areas. Covering about 80 square miles, the district is demographically mixed, with high mobility and homeless rates and notable achievement gaps. The district staff, led by Superintendent Ben Small and Assistant Superintendent Terrie VanderWegen, decided to focus on achievement by first examining how leadership impacts it, specifically instruction, which was fairly inconsistent among their 22 schools.

Strategic Solution

What started as a contract focused on **Balanced Leadership**[®] evolved and expanded as the district connected the dots between leadership, instruction, and student success to create a culture that converges around students. For example, the district chose **Classroom Instruction That Works**[®] (CITW) strategies as its “focus of change” for their Balanced Leadership work. They used data sets from **Power Walkthrough**[®] to build Smart Goals and action plans that are now part of their school improvement plans. At one of their consistently low-performing schools, North Pines, they used targeted **Success in Sight**[®] school improvement work, which included setting objectives using CITW language and monitoring the implementation of learning targets with Power Walkthrough. Through their work with “guaranteed and viable curriculum,” district leaders enhanced the curriculum in core content areas by aligning it to the instructional strategies.

Results

Consulting Director **Bj Stone** said district leaders have been very intentional and strategic in how they approach each new piece of work and are “constantly making connections.” It is helpful, as well, that all the work uses consistent language. “When they started something new, they could see immediately that the language was the same, and the concepts behind the language were coherent,” said Chief Program Officer **Howard Pitler**. “When you have the same language, you can have richer conversations.”

While you’d think taking on so much work would slow the rate of progress temporarily, test scores from fall 2011 indicate that’s not the case. For example, benchmark reading scores have gone up four percentage points in 3rd grade and five points in 5th grade, the number of 9th graders on track to graduate has gone up from 66 percent to 71 percent, and the district has topped their strategic targets in the number of students taking AP exams (the target was 70%, but they reached 78%) and the number of students passing (the target was 54% but the actual number was 65%).

Next Steps

Central Valley teachers have embraced the work and are carrying it forward. Teacher leaders and principals have been “masterful in thinking of ways to keep the work alive in between sessions,” Stone said—taking information back to other staff through grade-level and content-area meetings. They’ve even shown up for volunteer sessions held after school hours, which Stone said “speaks volumes” about their willingness to learn, and their commitment to student success.