

Leader of fast-changing school makes a commitment to consistency

Lincoln High School snapshot:

- 📷 2,200 students
- 📷 160 teachers, 200+ courses available
- 📷 I.B. World School
- 📷 350 ELL students, 30 home languages represented
- 📷 School improvement goals:
 - ➔ Improve reading skills for all students across content areas
 - ➔ Increase engagement for all students

LHS turns to McREL for:

Classroom Instruction That Works®

- ◆ Research-based strategies
- ◆ Instructional planning framework
- ◆ Consistent language and delivery

Balanced Leadership®

- ◆ Shared leadership
- ◆ Purposeful community
- ◆ Finding focus and managing change

Power Walkthrough®

- ◆ Informal observations
- ◆ Coaching and feedback

Results: New confidence, new outlook

- ❖ Dozens of teachers trained as *instructional teacher leaders*
- ❖ National Education Policy Center *School of Opportunity Award*
- ❖ *Consistent terminology* aids communication among peers and students
- ❖ *Consistent understanding and application* of research-based instructional strategies

“McREL has played a vital role. Classroom Instruction That Works has been our common language ... for what good instruction looks like.”

— Mark Larson, principal, Lincoln High School

“Teachers have put students at the center of their conversations, their decisions, their actions. You see evidence of it in the way the school is run and in the way student learning takes place.”

— Dr. Bj Stone, McREL consultant



New principal elevates learning with common instructional language and strategies



The Challenge

A big, urban high school in Nebraska's second-largest district finds itself confronting unprecedented change. As more diverse students, many of them refugees speaking dozens of home languages, take their seats in once-homogeneous classrooms, teachers discover they need a new and consistent vocabulary, too: one that casts jargon aside and helps them focus on what works best to help students learn.

Strategic Solution

As he made his rounds as the new principal of Lincoln High School, Mark Larson heard something that concerned him: Teachers in different parts of the building appeared to mean *almost* the same things when they used terms like “objective,” “target,” and “goal,” generating uncertainty in his mind about whether they were all speaking the same *professional* language. That couldn't be good for professional collaboration and student achievement, Larson reasoned—especially in a school full of English learners who crave and need clarity.

With a five-year federal school improvement grant to work with, Larson and a team of teacher leaders chose to use McREL's **Classroom Instruction That Works**® (CITW) framework to improve the quality and consistency of their instructional practices, and to establish a common vocabulary that explicitly defined objectives, targets, and goals for teachers and students.

“McREL has played a vital role,” Larson said. “Classroom Instruction That Works has been our common language throughout the building for what good instruction looks like. It's allowed us to call the same thing the same thing. We're starting to see objectives looking the same, sounding the same. We're seeing a slow but steady increase in cooperative learning structures.”

In addition to helping teachers use research-based instructional strategies, the grant allows for leadership training. Larson received training in McREL's **Balanced Leadership**® program from consultant Dr. Kent Davis and used McREL's **Power Walkthrough**® system to conduct informal classroom observations and coaching.

Most significantly, he wanted to learn how to effectively distribute leadership.

“We had 30 professional learning communities (PLCs) operating at a time, and teachers were having good conversations, but we didn't really have a defined person who was empowered, had training, and had time built into their schedule to be able to guide those conversations,” Larson said. Nor did they have a shared understanding of what teachers were supposed to accomplish in their PLCs.

With the aid of Dr. Bj Stone, the McREL consultant partnering with Lincoln High School to implement CITW, Larson arranged leadership training for 30 teachers, whom he now likens to instructional coaches, to lead the PLCs.

“Bj has been a big part of that, giving them in-depth training in CITW, group facilitation, and instructional coaching, to allow them to work with their colleagues who teach the same classes. We've started to see colleagues talk to each other and collaborate with one another, call the same thing the same thing, and talk about instructional strategies in a way that is contextually relevant. We're just starting to see its power,” he said.

Results

When he began as principal, Larson recalls, “I had a staff that had some amazing, amazing teachers on it, but inadequate opportunities to collaborate.” Now, with just a few visits from McREL consultants, that's happening. “I knew my challenge was to build a culture of collaboration where my best teachers started to have an influence, and structures and systems where they could impart their knowledge directly to their colleagues.”

The education world is noticing improvement, too: Lincoln High School was one of eight schools nationwide to receive the School of Opportunity Award from the University of Colorado Boulder's National Education Policy Center in January 2018.

Next Steps

McREL has been easy to work with, in terms of fees and time commitment, according to Larson. This has made it possible for the school to focus deeply on CITW and other McREL frameworks—taking time to study and implement critical strategies to ensure understanding and readiness before moving on. The school is in year three of its improvement grant as of this writing, and “we're going to continue the CITW journey the next couple of years,” he said.

