

DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Instructional Strategies at a District Level

Plainwell Community Schools, Michigan • March 2008

Topic: How to Organize Your Teaching

Practice: Higher-Order Questions

Highlights

- Implementing instructional strategies such as the use of higher-order questions can be effectively supported as a district-wide initiative.
- At this district, it was an important shift in culture to rely on data-driven decision making and research-based strategies rather than intuitive and personal experience.
- Using lead teachers who organize professional development, model classroom instruction, and set objectives for school teams helps to ensure successful implementation.

About the Sites

Starr Elementary School

Plainwell, MI

Demographics

95.7% White

2.7% African American

.9% Hispanic

.5% Asian

.2% Native American

37% Economically Disadvantaged

Plainwell Community Schools began district-wide curricular initiatives in 2005 focused on improving the way teachers organize and deliver instruction, including the use of non-linguistic representations of abstract concepts across the subject areas. At Starr Elementary, teachers incorporated this particular focus by:

- Using non-linguistic representations of abstract concepts in vocabulary instruction
- Incorporating hands-on science labs and demonstrations to help students make concrete connections to abstract concepts
- Adopting new social studies curriculum aligned to the middle school curriculum program that embedded research-based instructional strategies
- Coordinating professional development and model lessons through the use of a lead teacher to implement instructional strategies throughout the school

Plainwell Middle School

Plainwell, MI

Demographics

97% White

1% African American

1% Hispanic

24% Free or Reduced-price Lunch

Plainwell Community Schools began districtwide curricular initiatives in 2005 focused on improving the way teachers organize and deliver instruction. Curriculum restructuring throughout the district impacted the Plainwell Middle School's social studies department in particular through:

- A focus on research-based instructional strategies, including nonlinguistic representations of abstract concepts in vocabulary instruction, higher-order questioning techniques, and frequent review of material
- Adoption of new geography, world history, and U.S. history curriculum aligned with research-based instructional strategies at elementary and middle school grade levels
- Coordination of professional development and model lessons conducted by a lead teacher who received additional training to implement new programs at the middle school level and support adoption of the curriculum at the elementary level

Full Transcript

Bob Van Dis: We worked on implementing instructional practices from about 2003 to 2005, over a two year period, using Bob Marzano's *Classroom Instruction that Works* and from that time—from that '03 until now—our aggregate student achievement scores on the State Assessment Test went up 21 percent.

Teacher: So, I am finding really good results by doing that.

Van Dis: And that's the key thing. I mean you are doing the part of the strategy that's getting the results.

When we implemented the professional development instructional strategies, we purposely did several things to try to really embed them into practice and not make it a one shot deal. First, we gave teachers ample time to learn the strategies. We took two years, and we implemented one strategy a month.

Second thing we did, was we chose lead teachers—master teachers in each of our buildings—to do the implementation. Those teachers had additional training on this. They had volunteered. We paid them a stipend, and they ran the workshops and the meetings. And the way those workshops ran is that teachers would come in having practiced last month's strategy, having done a lesson. And so the meeting would start, everyone would get into small groups and share, "Here is how I implemented higher-order questioning. Here is how I implemented non-linguistic representations for vocabulary." Then the lead teachers would teach next month's strategy. They would provide a lesson on that. Folks had the book; they would read the book, and then they would talk about that. And then their assignment was, before we meet again in five to six weeks, find a lesson, implement that strategy, and be ready to share that. So that moved it from just the "sit and get" idea of a workshop to actually an expectation to try it out in your classroom and then get some feedback from peers.

Then the third thing we did was to make sure we were embedding that into everyday practice so that even though we did the workshops back in '03, '04 and '05, here in '08 those strategies are still being used. One of the things was that, well, our principals do classroom walkthroughs, and I do classroom walkthroughs. We have a feedback form we provide to teachers after we have been in their class for 10 or 15 minutes on many different aspects of good teaching, and those strategies are in that sheet. So we have the opportunity to praise a teacher when we see that strategy being used or to coach someone and encourage someone when we see a situation where we can say, "Hey, that might have been a good chance to beef up the questioning technique or to use non-linguistic representations."

Also, those strategies are part of our teacher evaluation system, so folks know that besides all the other things that go into teacher evaluation, the actual use of proven research-based instructional strategies is part of our teacher evaluation system.

Teacher: How about the color of a person's skin can tell you a lot about what that person is like? Do you agree or disagree, Brandy?

Student: I disagree.

Teacher: Why?

Student: Because it's kind of like don't judge a book by its cover.

Teacher: I like that analogy, very good.

Van Dis: What most impressed us on our teachers about Marzano's strategies is that he was saying if you use these strategies, you will increase student achievement by a certain percent, and we have the data to prove that. And that proved to be very convincing for our teachers.

Many times we have had teacher meetings where we are saying, "Hey, I have tried this, this works, hey you might want to try this. The kids like this. The kids enjoy this." But these instructional strategies had been tried and proven in research studies and said, "all things being equal, if you use these instructional strategies, you will get an increase in student achievement." So it did help shift the culture a little bit from "here's a good idea, you might want to try this," to, "here is a research based idea, let's all give this one a try."

Teacher: And everybody is looking that way except for this group. Why do you think that they are looking the opposite way?

Student: Well maybe they are missing their homeland that the Easterners are taking away from them.

Van Dis: Several of our master teachers who provided the initial two years of workshops in the district have become ongoing trainers for us. We've sent them out to have more training than others. They were very interested in doing this, and those teachers have done workshops for us as we would implement different curriculum or do follow-ups to see. Stamos is one of those people who has run workshops at the elementary level for us. Matt Moorman is another teacher who has done that, and they have been very successful being in-house people who can train in those strategies. They also offer themselves to go into classrooms and teach particular lessons for teachers. So they know they can invite one of them in and say, "Would you teach a lesson for me that I can watch?"

Teacher: Who can piggyback on to what Sam said the definition and what the opponents of Jackson thought.

Van Dis: It's very satisfying to me—four to five years after we began the initiative—to walk into classrooms, walk by classrooms and see those instructional strategies still being used. It's often rare to see initiatives have legs, to have staying power, and this one in our district really has.