

DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Unpacking Standards in Grade-Level Teams

Graham Road Elementary School, Virginia • October 2010

Topic: Improving K-3 Reading Comprehension

Practice: Teach Comprehension Strategies

Highlights

- A principal and a reading specialist describe the use of professional learning communities to unpack standards and guide instruction.
- Terry Dade, principal at Graham Road Elementary School, explains why the school has adopted standards-based instruction and how a grade-level team approach helps teachers develop a deep understanding of the standards.
- Kate O'Donnell, reading specialist, describes the professional learning community approach they use to structure grade-level team meetings.
- The second-grade team first unpacks a nonfiction standard to build a common understanding and then reviews summative and formative assessment data.
- Lessons are framed collaboratively based on assessment results and instructional purpose.
- Discussion centers on identifying texts that best match the standard and instructional strategy, and the development of classroom anchor charts and graphic organizers to support student learning.

About the Site

Graham Road Elementary School

Falls Church, VA

Demographics

69% Hispanic

13% Asian or Pacific Islander

10% Black

3% White

4% Other

85% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

58% English Language Learners

12% Special Education

Through extensive school turnaround efforts, Graham Road Elementary has become a high-performing school with an enriched academic program that is tailored to the needs of its diverse student body.

- The school has developed a standards-based reading curriculum to serve as its core reading program.
- Teachers begin with a single-strategy approach and help students learn and use multiple comprehension strategies over time.
- Text discussion begins in kindergarten through establishing partner sharing routines and providing practice with the teacher and peers.
- A balanced literacy approach guides reading and comprehension instruction.
- Language development is incorporated into instruction as a way of increasing comprehension.
- Teachers attend weekly grade-level professional learning community meetings to plan cohesive standards-driven lessons.
- Quarterly data meetings are held to discuss student achievement and to see how specific classes are performing.

Full Transcript

Terry Dade: At Graham Road, we do have a significant portion of our students are second language learners. Coupled with the fact that we have 80% free and reduced lunch population and approximately 92% are minority students, we do not have time to waste a single minute in our instructional day. So that's why we've chosen to be standards-based and to develop a true PLC (professional learning community).

With the challenges that some may use as excuses for students not performing, we use that as impetus for why we need to bring our A-game each and every day.

Focusing on the standards allows us to have a very extensive and well-thought-out curriculum map that every teacher here at Graham Road will be able to follow over the course of the year. This standards-based approach has also allowed us to dive in to say, “Do our teachers really know what the standard entails, what it means for what they’ll see their students being able to do in the classroom?” So we spend a lot of time unpacking those standards. We believe fully in the team approach to standards-based instructions, so we have resource teachers and reading specialists who work directly with each grade-level team.

Kate O’Donnell: At Graham Road, we have PLCs, which is professional learning communities. We want to work collaboratively with all the expertise and perspectives in the building to really dig very deeply into the math and literacy standards. A typical PLC will have members of the team including homeroom classroom teachers, also specialists like ESOL teachers, and reading specialists, and then special education teachers.

Unwrap standard

O’Donnell: At the second-grade PLC, we were looking at a standard from Virginia that looks at both fiction and nonfiction, and we were zooming into the nonfiction piece. So the standard asks for students to preview nonfiction using certain features, including pictures, titles, headings, and diagrams. And then we match that with another standard that was quite compatible. It asks students to utilize a table of contents and diagrams.

Build a collective understanding

O’Donnell: The idea behind the PLC is that we’re working with backwards lesson design. At the PLC, we’re saying, “Okay, if this is what our students are expected to learn and demonstrate understanding of, what does that entail? What’s going on there?” So instead of having a core reading program that tells us what to do on a given day, what texts to use, what strategies to use, what we do is we bring all the members of the PLC together. We look at that standard. We look at the essential knowledge that Virginia sets out. And then we, together, talk about our understanding of it, and then we bridge that with the professional literature that’s out there on a given standard. And we’ll talk through what is the professional literature saying about how students learn these certain strategies, or what are some obstacles that students might encounter? And then from there, we’ll take that collective understanding, and we’ll apply it to our lesson design that we will also come up with collaboratively.

Review assessments

O’Donnell: We will switch and talk about summative assessment—things that the state has released or that different assessment organizations have released—and we’ll also look at formative assessments that teams

have used in the past. We looked at last year's formative assessment and talked through how last year we gave this assessment that was much broader, and this year we're taking our students to looking at the nonfiction features more specifically in one-at-a-time fashion, so what do we want to change?

Frame the lesson

O'Donnell: Then, we'll go into the framing piece. Our framer will preselect texts that she thinks are good fits. Now, this is by no means a directive from her or from anyone else on the team. The purpose of that conversation is much more to say, "Here are the pieces that stand out in this text. Here's why this text works for this standard and this strategy." And then teachers can certainly use that very same text or say, "You know what, I know of another text that really meets my students' needs, and it does have all these other pieces. So that's the one I'm going to use."

In addition, they're also going to talk through "What are the tools that we want students to be using for engagement and accountability?" So at the second-grade PLC, our framer brought a big poster with a giant magnifying glass that structured how to write what I'm previewing, the different nonfiction features from the standard, and then a question that I predict will be answered, and then leaving tracks of the student thinking. Then that anchor chart will be visible in the room as part of the print-rich environment so that students can always look back to that anchor chart to remind themselves of the thinking and how that thinking was recorded, both throughout the year and then also when they are working with their individual graphic organizer that will be a very similar version to the class chart.

Benefits of collaboration

O'Donnell: The impact of PLCs on teaching reading comprehension and strategies and standards is pretty significant. Teachers come to the meeting having an idea, but they leave the meeting having a deep understanding, and the impact is seen in the classrooms. You have teachers who are doing standards-driven instruction. It's specific; it's fine, fine detail; it's deep and purposeful. But again, it draws on individual students, individual teacher, individual class desires and interests.