Aurora Quality Reviews
2009-2010 School Year

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Overview

- Purpose of the Quality Reviews
- Areas Being Measured
- Methodology
- Results
- Relationship to VISTA 2010
- Recommendations
- Q and A
- Next Steps

Purposes of Quality Reviews

- Point in time status of alignment to selected research-based practices in a school.
- Illustrates practices at various schools that have made greater/fewer increases in achievement.
- Identifies areas where school practice can be improved.
Instructional Indicators

5. create a culturally responsive learning community in the classroom.
6. routinely implement elements of differentiated instruction to meet the learning needs of all students.
7. have high academic expectations for all students and provide instruction that promotes individual student growth.
8. provide instruction designed to help students apply their learning outside the classroom.
9. provide assistance, intervention, and enrichment to supplement general classroom instruction to support the learning of all students.

Instructional Indicators

10. engage in horizontal articulation within grade/subject configurations.
11. engage in vertical articulation for adjacent grade levels or course sequences.
12. use research-based instructional strategies to meet the learning needs of all students.
13. use district-approved instructional materials to meet the identified needs of all students.
14. promote a school culture characterized by collegiality and shared responsibility for student learning.

Instructional Indicators

15. use available benchmark assessment results to guide instruction and reteaching.
16. administer a variety of formative assessments aligned to district curriculum maps or content scope and sequence and use results to guide instruction.
17. use results of the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) to plan instruction.
18. provide specific and timely feedback to students on an ongoing basis and help students to use the feedback to improve their performance.
Focus Group Participants

- 8 to 10 randomly selected teachers
  - Representing all subject areas, especially reading/language arts and mathematics
- 8 to 10 randomly selected parents
- 8 to 10 randomly selected students, grades 5 and up

Documents

School improvement plans
Sample materials from professional development sessions
CSAP and growth data

Sample Crosswalk

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Patterns of Results - Instruction

4. Use of specific pedagogies and expectations for student achievement were rated lowest among the instructional indicators. Relatively poor ratings were received for:
   • Effective differentiated instruction;
   • Culturally responsive learning environment;
   • Helping students see the relevance of their learning and apply learning outside the classroom;
   • High expectations for student performance.

Patterns of Results - Instruction

5. Teachers were not knowledgeable about research underlying instructional practices.
   • Trusted that the district was teaching them research-based practices.
   • Exceptions during PLCs studying particular areas of practice, such as oral language development.

Patterns of Results - Instruction

6. There was a wide range of practices around the identification of students for interventions, assistance, or enrichment and the services provided to them.
   • Just beginning to implement RTI.
   • Clear emphasis on "bubble" students.
   • Consistent lack of enrichment opportunities in some schools.
Patterns of Results – Leadership Support

2. All of the schools ensured that professional development was consistently focused on improving student achievement.

BUT...
- Some teachers were overwhelmed with the amount.
- Some schools had too much variety, with different topics for horizontal, vertical, and whole faculty teams, leaving teachers with the feeling that they could not implement it all.
- Some new teachers were paralyzed, not knowing which feedback to follow.

Patterns of Results – Leadership Support

3. Schools had mixed ratings on developing and communicating a clear, shared vision and mission.
- Many respondents had vague notions of the vision and mission.
- Improvement plans took precedent, but led to little knowledge of the big picture and were only well-known to leadership team members.
- Teachers did not know their responsibilities in the plans.
- Parents had little knowledge of the vision or the plan.

Patterns of Results – Leadership Support

4. Appropriate and adequate resources were being allocated in most schools.
- Thankful for Title I.
- Budget process was a mystery to teachers and parents.
2. Schools provided access to information using various sources, but in many cases, parents only knew about report cards.
   - Parents did not understand the standards-based report cards.
   - Parents did not have easy access to the Internet.
   - Parents generally were not aware of children's progress, except through some "Thursday folders."
   - Teachers had too little time for any communication except when absolutely imperative.

3. There was variation in the degree to which instructional staff sought and supported parent involvement.
   - Homework assignments were spotty.
   - Literacy nights, math nights, and other events were relatively well received, but participation varied, both among teachers and parents.
   - Parents were not certain how they could help their children to achieve.

**OUR ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS TOWARD MEETING YOUR VISION**

- A great school...
  - Focuses on student achievement and closing the socio-economic gaps (YES)
  - Creates a passion for learning (SOMETIMES)
  - Develops strategic leaders (MOSTLY)
  - Promotes a compassionate caring culture (SOMETIMES)
  - Develops and retains great teachers (SOMETIMES)
  - Values collaboration and empowerment (MOSTLY)
  - Embraces accountability (YES)
  - Manages finances responsibly with constant vigilance (YES)
  - Celebrates schools as an essential part of the community (SOMETIMES)
  - Understands, anticipates and adapts to a dynamic world (SOMETIMES)
  - Promotes physical and mental health for students and staff (SOMETIMES)
Executive Summary
All Schools

Background

Multiple schools within the Aurora Public Schools system have not made adequate yearly progress according to the definitions from the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. District leaders would like to reverse this situation and determine how to ensure that schools improve their practices each year and see the results of their efforts in increased test scores. RMC Research was selected to conduct quality reviews for Aurora schools that provide ratings and evidence on a number of research-based indicators associated with high academic performance.

Indicators of Alignment to Research-Based Best Practice

The indicators selected by the Aurora school district for the review included those that emphasized instruction, leadership, and family and community involvement. The indicators were derived from the research literature related to high academic and organizational performance and the school district priorities. Indicators included the following:

Instruction

1-1  Instructional staff know and understand the content of the subject taught.

1-2  Instructional staff communicate lesson objectives to students to help them understand specific learning goals and expectations for demonstrating proficiency.

1-3  Instructional staff communicate clearly and accurately in the learning environment.

1-4  Instructional staff use effective classroom management strategies to make efficient use of instructional time and to promote students’ active engagement in learning.

1-5  Instructional staff create a culturally responsive learning community in the classroom.

1-6  Instructional staff routinely implement elements of differentiated instruction to meet the learning needs of all students.

1-7  Instructional staff have high academic expectations for all students and provide instruction that promotes individual student growth.

1-8  Instructional staff provide instruction designed to help students apply their learning outside the classroom.

1-9  Instructional staff provide assistance, intervention, and enrichment to supplement general classroom instruction to support the learning of all students.

1-10 Instructional staff engage in horizontal articulation within grade/subject configurations.
Administrators, teachers, and other instructional staff provide parents with easy and regular access to information about the school and their children’s achievement and progress.

Instructional staff seek and support parent involvement in helping their own students to achieve.

Each indicator had an associated rubric. The rubric labels were “minimally proficient,” “partially proficient,” “proficient,” and “exemplary.” All of the rubrics had been used in other settings and were validated.

Methodology

RMC Research used previously validated data collection instruments as the basis for the review. Methods for data collection included classroom observations, administrator and teacher interviews, student and parent focus groups, and document review. Evidence for each rubric involved data triangulation, meaning that there were at least three independent sources of evidence analyzed to determine a rating.

School visits took place in November and December, 2009. RMC Research provided three to six staff members to collect data for each school. Data were collected over a two day period. Site visitors observed every core classroom and most other classrooms; interviewed nearly every teacher and all administrators at a school; moderated either one or two focus groups with parents and one or two focus groups with students in upper elementary (grades four and five) and middle school students. Schools were instructed to recruit focus group members that represented the entire population, including students and parents that represented a range of student academic performance, genders, and various subpopulations. Students who participated in focus groups generally represented the range, but parents who were active in the school were highly overrepresented in the focus groups since they were convenience groups. Multiple documents were also analyzed, including those that reflected school performance, the school improvement plan, and professional development approaches and materials.

RMC Research staff members who conducted the site visit carefully weighed the evidence for each indicator rating. A determination was made and evidence was summarized for each. The resultant school level report contains an overview; a summary data analysis of school performance measures; ratings summaries; and the evidence for the rating for each indicator.

Patterns of Results

Exhibit 1 shows the ratings for each school on each indicator. The pattern of results reveals a number of promising trends and a few concerns. The trends for instruction include the following:

- The district initiatives to promote coherence are being implemented. Every school that was reviewed had teachers in core content areas that closely aligned their instruction to the contents of the pacing guide. In most schools, most teachers followed the guide with very
based instruction through the pacing guides. In most schools, teachers relied on the district rather than their own reading or professional development to identify the most effective instructional strategies to put into place. Exceptions took place within some schools where teachers were engaged in studying a particular instructional area such as students’ oral language development or encouraging student dialogue.

- **There was a wide range of practices around the identification of students for interventions, assistance, or enrichment and the services provided to them.** The sample of schools reviewed were just beginning to implement Response to Intervention (RtI) and teachers reported that they were not adept in its practice. However, many students were receiving additional services as needed, and there was a clear emphasis on particular students (typically “bubble” students or those who were close to, but had not yet reached proficiency) to help them master specific content. In some schools, the lack of enrichment opportunities was particularly worrisome to parents who believed their children were unchallenged and being ignored in favor of the lower performing children.

- **Classroom management was generally very good, with a few exceptions.** Most of the schools and classrooms that were reviewed had strong behavioral expectations in place; pre-established behavioral rules for procedures and transitions being followed by most students; and teachers who used positive cueing to maintain or redirect behavior. However, in a few instances, classrooms were very poorly managed and the learning environment was being strongly affected.

- **Most schools promoted a school culture characterized by collegiality and shared responsibility for student learning.** In every school, teachers and administrators reported feeling a lot of pressure to succeed and feeling stressed about their performance. In most of the schools, though, the pressure to perform resulted in becoming more collaborative and interdependent. Teachers were exposing their instructional practices to peers and coaches in order to receive feedback on how to improve, and most teachers were learning to support one another in very positive ways. In many schools, principals and teacher leaders were said to have set the tone for type of collegiality, providing resources, multiple forms of support, and positive reinforcement. In a few cases, teachers reported that they generally liked each other but that there were rifts, either between teachers or more frequently, between teachers and administrators. In a few cases, there were conflicts reported between paraprofessionals and others. In these cases, the culture was affected in negative ways and teachers felt even higher levels of stress and anxiety.

**Leadership**

Across the schools, there was strong variation in ratings on leadership indicators. All of the schools in the sample had been identified for improvement because they had not made adequate yearly progress for several consecutive years. In every case, leaders had taken strong steps to change practices in the building. The leaders’ ability to manage change effectively appeared to be a key variable influencing much of the evidence that was collected. Specific patterns included the following:
- School leaders were uneven in their provision of support, monitoring, and evaluation of instruction. While all administrators followed the rules for formal teacher evaluations, informal evaluations, typically in the form of “learning walks” or “walkthroughs” were uneven, with some conducting these assessments and providing timely feedback often and some doing so much less frequently or in a manner perceived as being less useful. The perceived lack of equity in this area was a cause for concern in some schools.

Family and Community Involvement

Three indicators of family and community involvement were selected for review by the district. Each revealed a mixed pattern of proficiency.

- Families were engaged by schools as partners in their children’s education to varying degrees. The schools that were reviewed typically had family-home liaisons, and most of these individuals were highly regarded by both educators and parents. In some cases, significant outreach had occurred and active steps were being taken to remove barriers to parent involvement and to make the school a welcoming place. However, across the schools, it was rare to observe any parent volunteers, and in many schools, some parents reportedly did not feel welcome. Language barriers were prominent in some schools.

- Schools provided access to information using various sources, but in many cases, parents reported that they did not receive very much information about their children’s progress other than through report cards. Some schools made attempts to send information about student progress home to the parents, though vehicles such as a Thursday folder and through the web-based reporting systems in place. However, many parents said they did not understand the new standards-based report cards and they did not have easy access to the Internet (even though schools had computers they could use). Teachers reported that they did not have time to make phone calls unless there were significant academic or behavioral challenges for individual students. Several teachers wished they had more time for this, but reported that they were so consumed with professional development and lesson planning that they simply could not do it all.

- Similarly, there was variation in the degree to which instructional staff sought and supported parent involvement in helping students to achieve. Sometimes teachers sent homework assignments which required parent participation home with children. Occasionally, teachers sent optional practice assignments home for students to use to reinforce the skills being taught in school. Many of the schools sponsored literacy, mathematics, or science nights or parent coffees to share information or ideas with parents, but both parent and teacher participation in these events varied significantly. However, by most reports, most parents did not receive information specific to their child beyond progress reports.