

Northwest Literacy Cooperative Interim Progress Report

February 2018

Context

The Northwest Literacy Cooperative was formed in the summer of 2017 in collaboration between Education Northwest and the Caldwell and Minidoka school districts. The impetus for its formation were 2017 reviews of literacy instruction facilitated by Education Northwest in the two school districts that identified opportunities for improvement in the areas of:

- Teacher knowledge of the foundational skills of literacy
- Instructional techniques to facilitate literacy growth for students in kindergarten and first grades.

These findings, indicating common areas of focus for improvement along with other commonalities in size and demographics between Minidoka and Caldwell, created the opportunity for the two districts to work in cooperation to address their needs in literacy instruction. Education Northwest's role was to facilitate the two school districts' improvement work to achieve the ultimate goals of (a) all students reading at or above grade level by the end of the 3rd grade; (b) the establishment of an effective and sustainable literacy model in both districts; and (c) a cooperative model for school improvement that is sustainable, scalable, and replicable.

Accomplishments

To date, the Northwest Literacy Cooperative team has accomplished the following.

1. **Logic Model:** The cooperative has developed a logic model that will guide the planning for and implementation of the improvement process by detailing areas of focus for change and variables for evaluation.
2. **Shared Focus:** Each district identified a focus for instructional improvement. Facilitated by the collaborative environment of the cooperative, the districts identified a similar focus of improving teacher instruction of foundational skills using blending routines. The establishing of a shared focus has increased the leverage of cooperative professional learning opportunities by allowing for an explicit focus for professional learning sessions, as well as direct alignment of collaborative conversations between the two districts.
3. **Increased professional capital.** One goal of the cooperative is the establishment of an effective literacy model. The foundation of any literacy model is effective evidence-based practices. Through four face-to-face convenings of coaches and principals and virtual interactions among Education Northwest and district coaches, we have begun to establish a

shared understanding of the essential foundational elements of instruction for early reading that are necessary for success. This increase in professional knowledge for each district can now be distributed through coaches and principals to teachers and paraprofessionals to impact student outcomes.

4. **Cross-Agency Collaboration:** By focusing on a common goal with efforts to align a set of impactful improvement strategies, the cooperative has developed a relationship between two districts in Idaho. Implementation in educational settings occurs in an environment containing limited resources. Success depends on the ability to effectively allocate and utilize the resources. Forming a collaborative relationship with peers who possess similar institutional knowledge and who face similar day-to-day situations provides an opportunity to better leverage the resource of professional capital for both parties. The collective knowledge and problem solving that has and will occur provides the districts not only with an additional resource to assist with school improvement but also allows each to concurrently conserve resources that may normally be used in these endeavors and reallocate them to other areas of need.

Considerations

The accomplishments listed above are emergent and indicate that the cooperative is heading in a positive direction. There is still work to be done to fully attain the primary goals: improved student outcomes; sustainable literacy models; and a sustainable, scalable, and replicable literacy model. To put it simply, the current successes are fragile. There are key conditions that must be considered for the SSOS team to continue its momentum.

1. **Culture of Collaboration:** Right now collaborative efforts have been positive, but the culture of collaboration still must be nurtured. There are structures in place and continued focus and expectation that collaboration between district staff and within each district is necessary.
2. **Staff development:** The first year of the cooperative has focused on increasing capacity of district staff. For sustainable change to occur, explicit plans to continue this development must be developed and implemented. To date, staff have been introduced to many new concepts and practices. They are in the early stages of applying these practices. If explicit efforts are not made to support the current learning it will not sustain.
3. **Change process:** While it is tempting to pursue change efforts in a fast-paced way or through dramatic alterations to current practice (i.e., “turnaround” methods), cooperative districts will benefit from taking a disciplined, slower approach (i.e., “continuous improvement”) that ensures staff buy in and truly change the culture of members’ practices. As such, there have been good initial steps, but it will be important for the cooperative design team to stay the course and allow district staff to continue to refine its work without experiencing a change in focus or vision.

Each literacy cooperative district has invested time and resources into improving how the agency improves its efficacy and capacity for improvement in literacy instruction. This investment is noteworthy and worth sustaining and safeguarding. As each district continues their forward momentum, the following questions are worth considering.

- What is the speed of change that each district is comfortable with (what is the timeline to achieve the steps included in the logic model)?
- What are the current strengths and benefits of the cooperative, and what adjustments can be made to improve effectiveness?
- What are the next steps for the two districts currently in the cooperative to achieve the established goals?
- How can the cooperative be expanded to include additional districts?
- What role do the current districts play in relation to any newly included districts?
- Are there other staff members in each current district that need to be included in the cooperative design team to support sustainability?