

Education & Learning Program: Leadership For a PreK-3 Literacy Initiative

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The McKnight Foundation's Education and Learning (E&L) Program relies on leaders to cultivate the conditions and encourage the strategies needed for PreK–3 literacy pathways that result in increased student reading proficiency by the end of third grade. The initiative's vision for leadership includes commitment and participation from district leaders, shared school leadership, and principals who are “the primary drivers of all aspects of the initiative at the school level, [including] supporting and motivating staff, setting expectations for data collection and use, ensuring participation in professional development, and promoting and monitoring PreK–3 alignment.”¹ This brief describes how E&L Program resources supported district and school leaders, how leaders promoted implementation of the E&L Program, ongoing challenges leaders faced, and recommendations to further strengthen district and school leadership for the PreK–3 literacy work.

The findings are from 91 interviews conducted in fall 2013 and spring 2014 with district and school administrators, PreK–3 teachers (including dual language and English language teachers), and literacy coaches in the three districts and five pathway schools with an E&L Program implementation grant and with six Urban Education Institute (UEI) staff responsible for teacher training and leadership coaching.² The perspectives of the interviewees may not represent the full staff in these schools or at UEI.

E&L Leadership Supports

Through the E&L Program, school and district leaders received both group and individualized supports from UEI staff to help them provide the necessary focus and resources to implement PreK–3 pathways. In 2013–14, district leadership attended quarterly meetings with UEI staff that kept them informed of the timeline and rollout of the

E&L Program. UEI also held leadership cohort meetings quarterly for district and school leaders; participants varied by district and school but often included E&L Program managers, principals, literacy coaches, and teachers. The leadership cohort was created in response to school leaders' requests for more opportunities to collaborate with each other. The leadership cohort focused on alignment issues and use of 5Essentials (5E) survey data to improve school organization and effectiveness.

At the individual school level, principals received individual coaching by a UEI coach monthly, as well as help interpreting and using school-specific 5E survey and STEP data.³ The individual coaching was targeted to each principal's leadership and building needs, such as helping leaders set and communicate instructional priorities, streamline and align literacy activities, and develop a literacy coaching plan.

Accomplishments

District and school leaders initiated new policies and practices to strengthen PreK–3 literacy.

Through their communications and actions, leaders made PreK-3 literacy a priority and worked to create some of the conditions to support implementation and positive outcomes. District leaders created new policies (around school and bus schedules, PreK models, and PreK enrollment requirements), supported changes in curriculum and assessments, and made exceptions for pathway schools to pilot ideas. For example, MPS extended the PreK enrollment deadline in the pathway schools to enable more neighborhood children to enroll in the schools at PreK and strengthen the PreK–3 pipeline. District leaders also considered the needs of the initiative in some staffing decisions, such as new principal hires, principal supervisor assignments, and the hiring and retention of literacy coaches. For example, the BCCS superintendent appointed a new principal with a strong literacy background to help the elementary school develop a clearer vision for

¹ Pathway Schools Initiative: Phase II Funding Guidelines

² E&L Program schools with implementation grants are Earle Brown Elementary School, Brooklyn Center Community Schools (BCCS); Wellstone Elementary School and Saint Paul Music Academy (SPMA), Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS); Jefferson Community School and Andersen United Community School, Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS).

³ STEP—the Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress—is a developmental literacy assessment for grades PreK–3.

moving the literacy work forward. Across the districts, these undertakings created some of the conditions necessary for the E&L Program to be successful and signaled to school staff that the district viewed this initiative as a long-term systemic effort.

At the school level, principals set learning goals and expectations, communicated how the E&L Program was integrated into the school's mission, and improved school structures, such as professional learning communities (PLCs), in support of the work. For example, the new BCCS principal made consistent literacy practices a priority in the school by setting clear expectations that teachers use the balanced literacy framework and the readers workshop model and work within specific time recommendations for the literacy block.

School leaders used data to inform their decisions.

The 5E and STEP data made available through the E&L Program and the support for interpreting them helped leaders focus the schools' efforts.⁴ Through the leadership cohort, principals reviewed 5E data to set school-level goals and plan targeted supports on areas deemed weaker by the survey data. For example, the data revealed that some of the pathway schools needed improvement in the area of effective leadership and that leaders needed to make changes in their leadership styles and structures. One SPPS principal's goal, therefore, was to develop more shared leadership with teachers.

As a result of these efforts, schools saw overall growth on the 5E survey. One principal described her school's progress on the 5E survey:

Last year at this time, I was basically all red. I had maybe one yellow and it said "not yet organized." ...I've gone from that to two greens and three yellows and it saying that I am now "organized for improvement." So, I'm really excited about that because I've been so intentional about making sure, as a leader, that I am aligning [instructional priorities, learning targets, and supports].⁵

In addition to the 5E data, principals used STEP and Mondo data to set schoolwide instructional goals, on which they based professional development, PLCs, coaching plans, and teacher performance goals. Some

principals, with support from UEI leadership coaches, used STEP data to set instructional priorities aligned with the school's goals, communicated those priorities to teachers, helped teachers link those priorities to observable behaviors and practices, and held teachers accountable for implementing those practices. For example, according to a district administrator, the MPS principals set instructional priorities to guide teachers' practice:

Both principals created key instructional priorities for the school year last spring, and they have stuck to them and it's really helping their staff know that here's the focus, here's what we're supporting, and here's what we're learning. They are able to come back to those priorities in any conversations that come up around the table about professional development and PLCs.

New leadership structures helped the districts and schools better address the multiple aspects of the initiative, increase support for the program, and build capacity to improve and sustain their literacy efforts.

Districts increased communication across departments by convening the directors of multiple departments to support alignment across early learning, K–12, and in some cases English Learner instruction. For example, in BCCS, the Director of Community Learning, whose department includes the PreK program, partnered with the elementary school principals and the E&L Program manager to coordinate curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development. In MPS, the program manager, the executive directors of early childhood and multilingual education, and the directors of literacy, afterschool programs, community education, and research, evaluation, and assessment, met monthly about the E&L work.

Each of the five pathway schools had a leadership team whose role was to keep the initiative at the center of the school's work and make decisions concerning the E&L Program. The configurations varied across the schools, with some having a leadership team specifically for the E&L Program and others overseeing the E&L work as part of the overall school leadership team. Some leadership teams involved only administrators and literacy coaches and others also involved teachers. Principals received guidance from UEI leadership coaches on how to involve their leadership teams in reflecting on the effectiveness of their school's efforts and areas for improvement. UEI staff reported that principals were

⁴ SPPS continued to use the Mondo assessment rather than switch to the STEP. UEI helped SPPS leaders use and interpret Mondo data.

⁵ 5E survey results are color coded to denote performance levels: red = very weak; yellow = neutral; green = very strong.

learning how to involve coaches and teachers more in shared leadership roles. A UEI coach said that SPPS principals responded quickly by bringing in more teachers to the leadership cohort meetings. Similarly, an MPS school involved 19 staff members on the new instructional leadership team to ensure that all voices in the school were heard. The team engaged in a quarterly review process of the school's improvement plans and how STEP data were being used. A district administrator described the team's impact on staff:

[Because of] the leadership that the teachers now take as part of the quarterly review process, they really...own the school improvement plan, own these different strategies, talk about how they're able to analyze and talk about the STEP in very different ways. And the principals...in the way they are approaching their decisions, the way they're approaching their team indicates to me that they're thinking very differently and strategically.

Principals' growth in leadership skills enabled them to better support alignment and consistent practices in their schools. Through the support from UEI, principals learned best practices for aligning literacy policies and practices, how to be instructional leaders, and how to have difficult conversations with teachers around improvement. As part of the leadership cohort, leaders visited a district successful in aligning its practices across all grades and learned about effective systemwide alignment strategies. Participants were highly positive about this experience and reported learning about the conditions that need to be in place for successful PreK-3 alignment, such as allowing all stakeholders to have input and ensuring they hold shared expectations.

One-on-one leadership coaching from UEI helped principals bolster their instructional leadership by using data to guide instructional goals and practices and hold teachers more accountable for their instructional practices. An SPPS principal reported becoming more adept at developing an effective literacy coaching plan, encouraging teachers to accept coaching, and holding teachers more accountable for their instructional practices and student growth. She described a leadership strategy she learned from her UEI leadership coach:

He's taught me a really good strategy: if the teacher is saying, "Nope, I don't want coaching, I already know how to do all those

strategies," then as administrators, we say "Yep, we're going to check to see how well you're doing." Then I suggest, "I'll follow up in another week [and in the meantime] I want you to observe a certain teacher or I want you to get coaching in this," and I don't really give them an option [to decline].

Challenges

While district and school leaders showed commitment to and progress in developing PreK-3 literacy pathways, they encountered challenges in balancing competing demands and putting all of the necessary structures in place to fully support implementation.

District leaders struggled with how best to balance the special needs of pathway schools with the needs of other schools in their districts. In larger districts with multiple elementary schools, district leaders were challenged with how to support the pathway schools in implementing the unique strategies supported by the E&L Program while still considering the implications those efforts would have for the other schools in the district and the district as a whole. For instance, SPPS had adopted the Mondo assessment districtwide several years earlier. District leaders were reluctant for the two pathway schools to switch to STEP for grades PreK-3 as it would mean the upper grades in those schools and the rest of the district schools would not be aligned.

School leaders grappled with having to change many aspects of their literacy system at once while continuing to address other areas of need. As part of the E&L Program, principals needed to address many different areas of the PreK-3 literacy system, such as the connection of K-3 to PreK; family engagement; dual language learner and English learner models; curriculum, instruction, and assessments; afterschool programming; and interventions for struggling students. Leaders had to prioritize which components to tackle first, and some parts necessarily received more attention than others.

Further, principals still had to address school needs not related to the E&L Program, such as math and writing. School leaders recognized that they do not have the bandwidth to do everything at the same time or to the same degree, as described by one principal:

Because we're a needy school, the district gives us many opportunities for many new things, which is great, but how do we fit all

of that in? ...Since we're doing the E&L Program and we have Urban Education Institute here, can we put a hold on everything else? No, everything keeps moving, all of the moving parts go as fast as they've ever been going.

Although some teachers were building their leadership capacity, they had difficulty sharing what they learned with their peers. The literacy cohort was intended to be a vehicle to build teacher leader capacity, but it was not clear to participants what they were supposed to do with their newly gained knowledge and skills. Teachers in one district who participated in the literacy cohort cited several reasons for their difficulty in sharing back with other teachers, including lack of teaching team meetings, limited access to other teachers, and lack of representation of every grade in the cohort.

The literacy coaches' role in leading teachers through this work was not always well received by teachers. Although literacy coaches' roles varied across the schools, from facilitating PLCs to observing classrooms and modeling instruction, they all were expected to help teachers put into practice the instructional strategies they learned from UEI. However, teachers did not always want or accept the coaches' support. For example, in one school the coaches were seen as an arm of the administration and were not welcomed into the classrooms of some teachers. A coach expressed, "[Being perceived as administrators] has served as somewhat of a barrier between our relationship with teachers and some of the openness of our coaching conversations which we believe to be the crux of our work." In another school, some teachers reported feeling like directives were very top down and that "there [was] a lot of telling" from the coaches and that teachers did not have much input into their instruction.

Changes in district leaders, principals, and coaches interrupted work and required the rebuilding of relationships. Because the E&L Program is a complex systemic initiative, stability of leadership positions is crucial to consistent implementation and continued progress. BCCS saw turnover of the superintendent, principals, program managers, and coaches in 2013–14. While these changes may have been necessary to build a team with the needed expertise, it created mistrust among staff, who felt that administration did not properly communicate with them about the changes. Leaders

are now trying to address this distrust so that teachers will be willing to make their practice public and to risk trying the new practices being introduced.

Principals had limited control over staff turnover and replacements. In MPS, school leaders had little control over staffing changes and they were left with unavoidable high levels of staff turnover, over 50% of the PreK–5 staff in one school. Further, the hiring process did not always allow principals to hire staff who bought in to the school's direction. The changes meant that each year new teachers had to be trained on the STEP and associated instructional strategies and coaches had to establish trust with them. One teacher explained, "We've had so much turnover among the staff that we're reinventing the wheel every year. And that first year [implementing STEP] is rough, because it's unwieldy at first."

Recommendations

District and school leaders have taken important steps to foster effective PreK–3 literacy. However, the interviews identified ways in which leaders could further advance the PreK–3 literacy effort, as well as additional leadership supports they need.

- District leaders, UEI staff, and foundation staff need to discuss where the unique needs of pathway schools may create issues for other districtwide efforts and ways to minimize unintended effects.
- School leaders need coordinated guidance from district leadership and UEI leadership coaches on how to prioritize the many pieces of the E&L Program while maintaining focus on other areas of need.
- School leaders need to broaden shared responsibility of the literacy work to more teachers to increase school capacity to implement and monitor the work and avoid silos of implementation and buy-in.
- School leaders need to set clear expectations for the leadership and implementation roles of teachers and coaches, and to ensure that systems are in place to support those roles.
- Districts need to better support schools in hiring and retaining strong teachers who buy in to this work.

The E&L Program will continue to build leadership capacity of district and school leaders to support aligned PreK–3 literacy experiences.