School Priorities

Rural School is a small K-8 school located about 15 miles outside of a moderately-sized Oregon city. With only 4 classrooms, Rural School has 2-3 grade levels in each room. The school area was once booming with logging, but now is home to a wide range of families. Almost 70% of the families qualify for free/reduced lunch, but there are several very affluent families who live in the area because they want to have a large house on the river.

Several years ago staff began engaging in conversations about goals for student learning. While some felt that all kids could team and goals should be set at 100% meeting benchmarks, others felt that there were too many outside factors - home life, student defiance, etc. - to have that kind of expectation. Over several months and some deep sharing, all staff came to appreciate the goal of 100% of students meeting benchmarks. While we have only reached that goal in some areas and at some grade levels, we are continually celebrating our accomplishments and at the same time pushing ourselves to reach all kids.

District Priorities

Several years ago, district leadership created a vision document that outlined priorities for each grade level. It described the Kindergarten through second grades as the “Learning to Read” stage and grades 3 and up as “Reading to Learn.” This aligned with our school beliefs, and eventually helped us decide which measures were best to use for our tracking and accountability purposes.

What the Research and Theory Say

In Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work, DuFour, DuFour and Eaker describe the big ideas behind a PLC. In that description, they state, “Schools will not know whether or not all students are learning unless educators are hungry for evidence that all students are acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions deemed most essential to their success.” It is clear that being a good reader is an essential skill to success.

The highly-popular and research-backed 2004 publication Reading First emphasizes using an optimal mix of 15 key elements in order to create an effective school-wide reading system. Although there is some choice involved, the research is clear that without ongoing summative assessment, a program cannot succeed. In order to be effective instructors and hold ourselves accountable, we felt that we needed a consistent summative assessment that we all felt was a valid measure of success. Due to district decisions, our school has used three different measures over the last four years (DIBELS, AIMWeb and Easy CBM). The last two years we have been using Easy CBM and our district plans to continue this, but their “overall score” for students changed between years one and two. We had to make sure we were using them. Taking the OSA is a requirement each year for each kid in our 3rd through 8th grades, so we knew we would be doing that anyway. The Easy CBM comprehension measures, though, were not required ones. We had already been using them consistently throughout the year in 4th through 8th grades, so we had to start using them in 2nd and 3rd. Since we didn’t start the year off using them at these lower grades, we wondered if we should just wait until next year to begin them. In the end, we decided to start them now so that the kids and the staff would get used to the process. Next year, the plan is to start the year off with them at 2nd through 8th grades.

Options for Assessment

Since we are part of a school district, our school based measure has always been the one approved and purchased by the district. For last year and this year, that measure has been Easy CBM. This tool provides several different reading measures at each grade level. For instance, during their first grade year, students take the assessments for phoneme segmentation, letter name fluency, letter sound fluency, word reading fluency, and passage reading fluency. While this gives us a lot of data to analyze and help inform instruction, it creates a problem when we want a summative measure that shows overall progress in reading. In the past, we’ve used reading fluency (also called oral reading fluency) for all grades. The Easy CBM, while it has its limitations, does also offer a reading comprehension measure starting in the 2nd grade and we wondered if we should use that. We considered all of the following options before making our decision:

1. Use only Easy CBM reading fluency as our measure of reading at all grades
2. Use Easy CBM reading fluency as our measure of reading at grades K-2 and use the Oregon State Assessment (OSA) as our measure in grades 3-8
3. Use the Easy CBM reading fluency measure at grades K-1 and Easy CBM reading comprehension measure at grades 2-6
4. Create some kind of formula where we could average all of the reading measures into one conglomerate score
5. Use several measures: Easy CBM reading fluency for grades K-8, Easy CBM comprehension for grades 2-6, and OSA scores for grades 3-8

Our Choice

After much thought and discussion, our staff decided to go with choice 5 - use multiple measures. Our focus as a school has long been preparing kids to be successful in high school, college and careers. While we recognize the correlation between reading fluency and reading comprehension, we also feel that if we have valid reading comprehension measures available to us then why not use them.

Our conversation then turned to which comprehension measure to use. Easy CBM was readily available to us as an online tool with multiple measures at each grade level. The students could take the tests in about 45 minutes and we could print out graphs of progress over time and show them to kids. The OSA, on the other hand, provides a much more reliable measure and the format for testing is easier for kids (shorter passages with fewer questions and more graphics per passage).

After thinking about best practices and hearing pros and cons of each measure, we thought that the more data the better. Being such a small school, we realized that we had the opportunity to look at individual kid data when making program choices. By having more data we thought we could get a more complete picture of each child’s reading success.

It is important to note that we wanted to use option 4, but realized that nobody on our staff had enough background in statistics and reading research to be able to come up with a sufficient formula to combine all the measures into one. Basically - we knew enough to know that we didn’t know enough on this topic.